borderline

THE Comics Magazine

October #3

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Peter Bagge &
Jerry Ordway

Features on:
Goscinny &
Kurtzman
Mauricio de Sousa
Eric Stanton
Mike Deodato Jr
Shelton Bryant

Columns · Reviews
News · Views
Small Press

PG

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THE COMICS MAGAZINE

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BORDERLINE
THE COMICS MAGAZINE

LINE OF FIRE

Phil Hall waits for a superman

THIS is a global magazine. It is designed to be read by anyone who can read English and is interested in comics, regardless of nationality, colour or creed. The first two issues were downloaded in over 50 countries – from over 15,000 copies in the UK and USA to one single copy in India. One day, I hope to be able to say that people in over 100 countries read **Borderline**, unified by a common thread – comicbooks.

Comics is a worldwide medium and the irony for many Brits and Americans is that while we believe we are the be-all and end-all of the comics industry, we are just a small splash in a vast ocean of wealth.

But, for us, New York has been the centre of comics for many years. The high profile Western world publishers DC Comics and Marvel both operate out of one of the planet's largest cities. These companies have been responsible for mass destruction on a grand scale. We've seen the destruction of universes, planets, cities, time lines - comics have destroyed everything...

I spent three solid days after the events of September 11 in New York staring blankly at either a TV or a monitor. I did very little else. For me it was one of the most shocking things I've ever been a witness to.

I was overwhelmed when I discovered that many of my friends and colleagues in NYC were OK. A good buddy of mine broke down in front of his computer on receipt of an email which confirmed that his friends at DC were away from the horror and all safe.

Someone said the destruction of Manhattan Island on September 11 was like something out of **The Authority** or a Bruce Willis movie. While this statement might be considered crass or glib it is also, for some of us, our only point of reference, regardless of its rooting in fantasy. Because the destruction of the World Trade Towers and part of the Pentagon *was* the stuff of fantasy. Fantasy rarely becomes reality – we leave that to Hollywood or comicbooks. But the imagineers could never capture the sheer horror of one's world caving in around them, as it did...

Towering Inferno, *Independence Day* and *Armageddon* have all depicted carnage and horror on grand scales - all give precognitive nods to the events that changed the world in 2001 - and yet these films have something in common. They all had their own supermen. Steve McQueen and Paul Newman in *Towering Inferno*; Bill Pulman and Will Smith in *Independence Day*; Bruce Willis in *Armageddon* – they saved the day, so that the rest of the world could forget and carry on. The problem is, while fantasy has invaded our carefully ordered lives in the worst possible way, there isn't really a superman who can save the day...

I'm not a religious person - my gods are the sun, the earth, music, art, love and spirit, the things that all of us hold.

Music has been very important to me and it helps us come to terms with stuff. All music has poignant or pertinent memories for everyone. In the last week alone, I have listened to many of my favourite albums, in a lot of cases there have been references to things that I could easily apply to NYC 9-11.

But the most heart-rending song I've listened to was one I was introduced to last year. A relative gave me a music CD called *The Soft Bulletin*, by Flaming Lips – a truly innovative US band. The legend blazoned across the CD's packaging said "Unlike anything, ever" and it is (and was). The track that, for me, stood out head and shoulders above the rest is called 'Waiting for a Superman'. I found myself playing this song repeatedly over the last couple of days. You really should listen to it to be able to fully appreciate the personal mood I'm trying to illustrate, because it is a song that perfectly illustrates hope and helplessness... Here are the words:

I asked you a question
but I didn't need you to reply.
Is it gettin' heavy??
But then I realized... is it gettin' heavy??
Well I thought it was already
as heavy as can be.
Is it overwhelming
to use a crane to crush a fly??
A good time for a superman
to lift the Sun into the sky...
cause it's gettin' heavy, well I thought it was already
as heavy as can be.
Tell everybody waitin' for a superman that they
should try to hold on best
they can.
He hasn't dropped them,
forgot them or anything...
It's just too heavy for a superman to lift...

Suddenly everything has changed...

Phil Hall, Sept 14, 2001

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Into comics? Into the internet? WWW.INCOGNITOCOMICS.COM Find out why we're so popular

The Kurtzman-Goscinny Connection

Rodrigo Baeza examines the links between these two iconic comics creators.

HARVEY Kurtzman is primarily known for creating, in 1952, the successful **Mad** magazine, published by the legendary publisher EC (Entertaining Comics). He is also known for two war comics he edited for the same publisher: **Two-Fisted Tales** and **Frontline Combat**. Working with artists such as Will Elder, Wallace Wood, Jack Davis and John Severin, Kurtzman the writer/editor (and occasional artist) was the creator of some of the best comics of that period, writing thoroughly researched war stories that possessed a sense of realism rarely seen in other comics (in reaction to those war comics of the period which glorified war for an infantile audience, relying on simplistic plots and xenophobic stereotypes), and introducing in **Mad** a totally new type of humour that relied heavily on sharply-focused satires of the popular culture of the time.

Kurtzman later created other humour magazines that were less successful than **Mad** (e.g., **Trump**, **Humbug**, and **Help**), but the style of humour first seen in **Mad** ended up being strongly influential on North American comics. In **Help** Kurtzman published some of the first work by important underground artists such as Gilbert Shelton (**Wonder Wart-Hog**) and Robert Crumb (**Fritz the Cat**), and also worked with Gloria Steinem (who later created **Ms.** magazine) and Terry Gilliam (who would become a member of the Monty Python team and director of movies such as *Brazil* and *Twelve Monkeys*). Kurtzman and **Mad** were among the most important influences on the North American underground comics movement, which, besides Shelton and Crumb, also included Art Spiegelman (creator of **Maus**), Jack Jackson, Skip Williamson, Jay Lynch, Kim Deitch, Spain Rodriguez and others.

René Goscinny was a French editor and writer who is primarily known for creating **Asterix** with Albert Uderzo in 1959, a comics character who would prove to be enormously popular in France and eventually the rest of the world. Besides writing other well-known series such as **Lucky Luke** and **Iznogoud**, Goscinny was one of the founders and directors of **Pilote** magazine, where some of the first work by important European comics artists such as Claire Bretécher, Fred, Jean "Moebius" Giraud, Marcel Gotlib, Mandryka, Resier, and Jacques Tardi was published. Goscinny created the "reality pages" ("actuels") in **Pilote**, where several of these artists were given the opportunity to experiment with a more satirical style of humour, oriented towards a more adult audience. Some of these artists later created their own magazines, such as **L'Echo des Savanes** and **Metal Hurlant**, which would prove to be influential on artists on both sides of the Atlantic.

Goscinny saw the creation of **Asterix** – one of the first French comics to reach an adult audience – and his work as director of **Pilote** – in which he allowed young authors to experiment with new styles – as two important causes of the respectability that comics began to acquire in France during the 1960s.

Those who may have read Goscinny's **Asterix** albums or enjoyed Kurtzman's **Mad** parodies might not be aware that a connection exists between these two important creators of comics. Before the creation of either **Mad** or **Pilote**, Kurtzman and Goscinny

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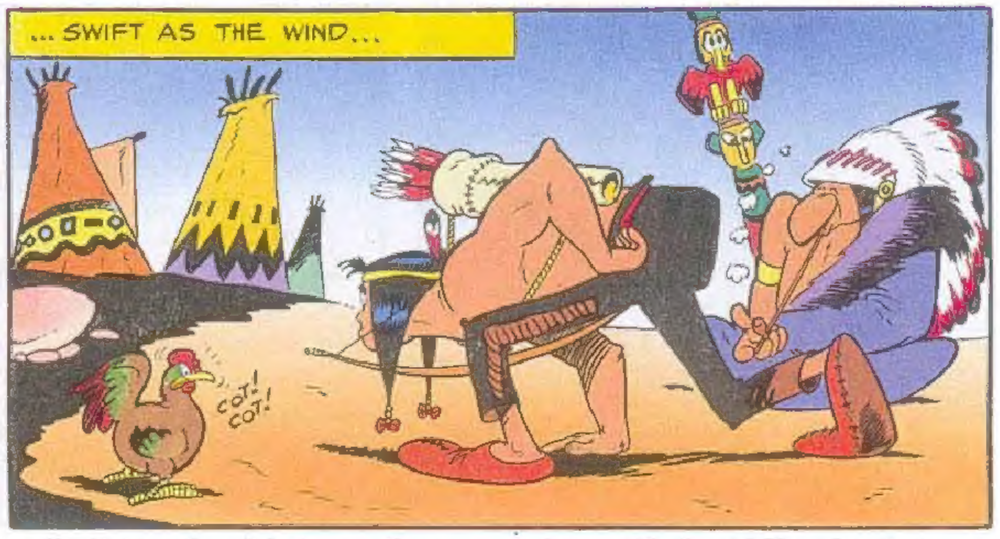
met each other in New York, becoming good friends and working together on some minor projects. Even after this period, each would remain aware of the work the other was doing, and it's even possible in some cases to detect direct influences of the work of one on the work of the other.

René Goscinny was born in France in 1926, but two years later his family moved to Buenos Aires, Argentina, where he lived during his infancy and adolescence. In 1945 he and his mother moved to New York, where he intended to work as a cartoonist. After some time in the French Army, in 1948 Goscinny met a group of American artists who shared a studio: Will Elder, Jack Davis, John Severin, and Harvey Kurtzman.

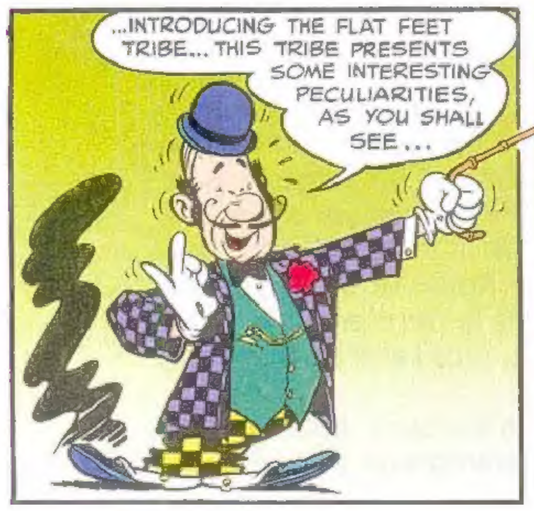
Harvey Kurtzman had been born in 1924, and his most important work before meeting Goscinny was the **Hey, Look!** series of fillers that he had been producing since 1946 for editor Stan Lee of Timely Comics (later to be known as Marvel Comics). Goscinny worked for some years in the studio that Kurtzman and the other artists shared, doing advertising work and illustrations for children's books. Both Kurtzman and Goscinny illustrated these books, done for a New York publisher named Kunen, and in some cases evidence of an actual collaboration between the two can be seen in the artwork.

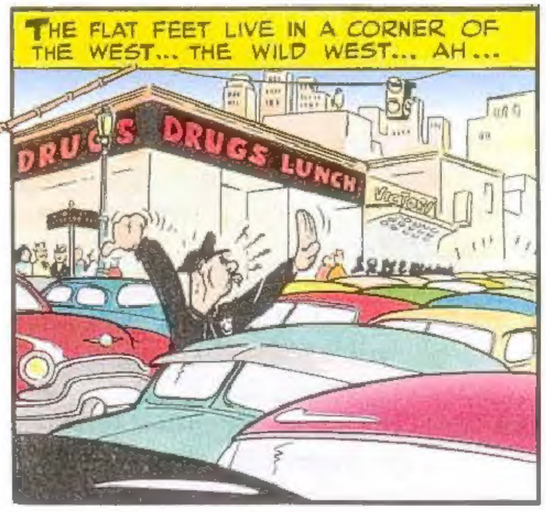


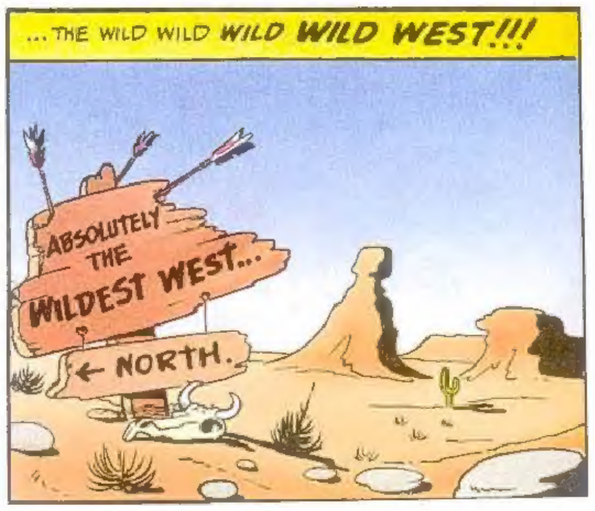
This wasn't a particularly successful period for Goscinny, however, since his career as a cartoonist in New York wasn't particularly lucrative. This caused his return to France in 1951, where he devoted most of his energies to writing scripts for other cartoonists.

Recalling these times in an interview in **Cahiers de la Bande Dessinée**, Kurtzman said: "It's me, and only me, the cause of René´s success in the world. Look, some years ago he and I worked together in New York. We shared a studio and were employed for a series of projects. My influence on him was so strong that everything we embarked on would turn into a disaster, so he later had no other recourse but to try his luck elsewhere, which he did. ... Now that he has left this country, we realize how much we need him. Especially because he's taken his mother and her delicious French cuisine with him." (During this period, Kurtzman used to have lunch once a week in Goscinny's house).

However, Goscinny's return to France didn't mark the end of the "collaborations" between these two creators. Goscinny came back to New York a short time later, working for the Franco-Belgian publisher Dupuis, which was interested in publishing a magazine about television in the United States. Goscinny had met an artist named Albert Uderzo on his return to France, and together they had prepared some strips featuring an Indian called Oumpah-Pah. Kurtzman translated this material into English, and he and Goscinny tried to find someone interested in publishing it. They were unsuccessful; subsequently, Goscinny returned to France again, writing comics for various magazines and sometimes collaborating with his friend Uderzo. (**Oumpah-Pah le Peau Rouge** would finally appear in **Tintin** magazine from 1958 to 1961, and these strips, along with the 1952 strips that Kurtzman translated, can be found in a series of three volumes published by Les Editions Albert René).







Kurtzman was already working for EC by this time, and in 1952 he created **Mad**, thus assuring his place in the history of comics. References to his friend Goscinny can be found in **Mad** and in his war comics; for instance, in "Sheik of Araby!" (**Mad #3**), a soldier named Goscinny can be seen in the third panel of the third page. Kurtzman eventually left **Mad** magazine and EC after a dispute with publisher William Gaines, going on to try his luck with other projects such as the humour magazines mentioned previously.

In 1959 Goscinny (along with Jean-Michel Charlier and Albert Uderzo) created **Pilote** magazine, where his most popular creation, Asterix, appeared. The character proved to be enormously popular, not only with children but with adults (analyzing the reasons why it was so popular would take a much longer article than this one!), and his adventures were reprinted in book form and have been kept

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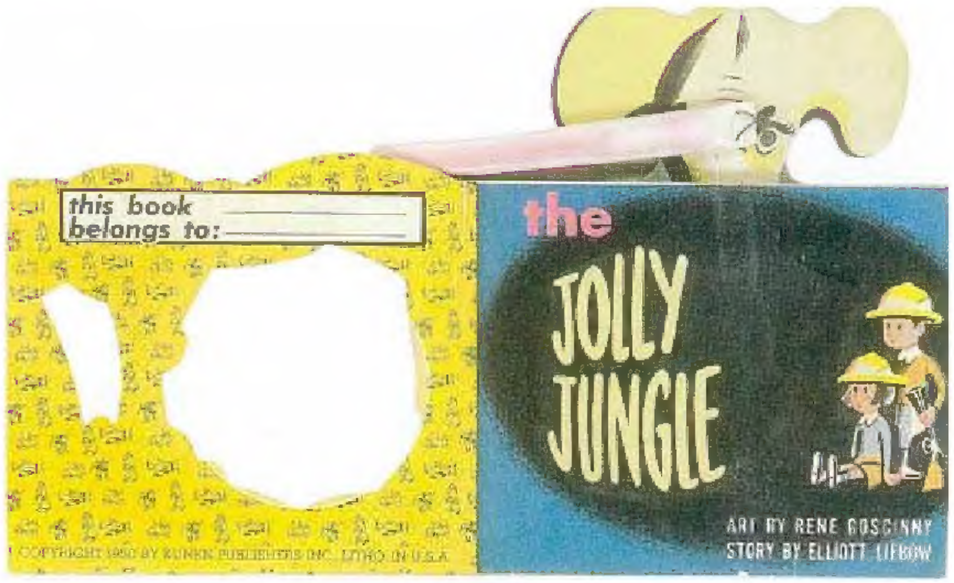
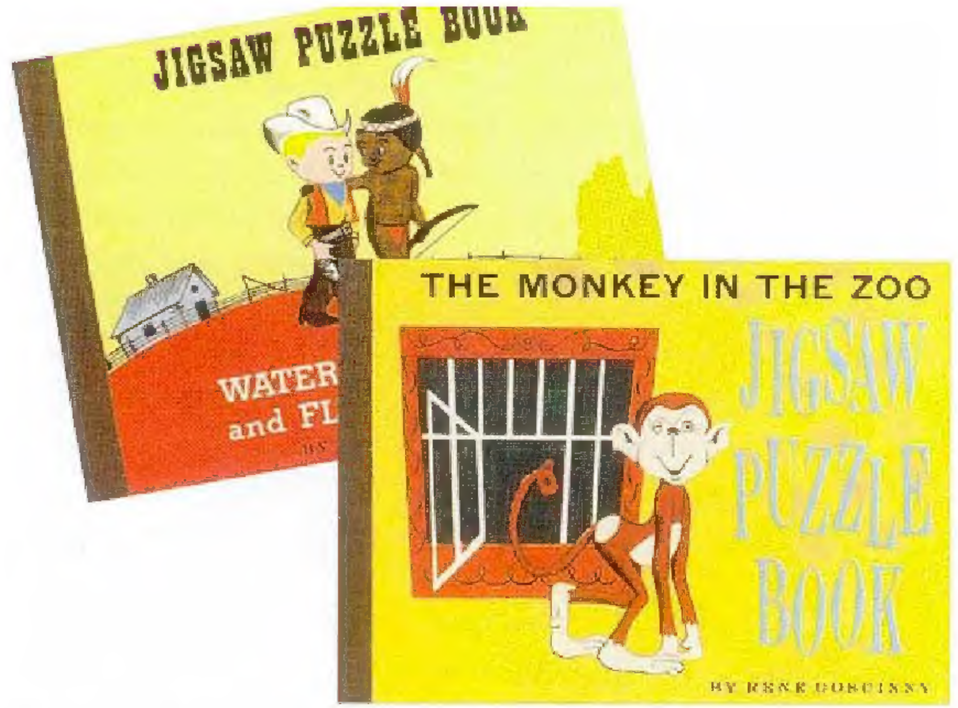


continually in print to this day. By this point Kurtzman had already lost contact with Goscinny, but a few years later he would see his friend again. In Kurtzman's own words: "René had been gone for about two years when Jack Davis and myself and our wives decided to take a trip to France. René met us at the station, and then completely squired us around Paris for a whole week. I couldn't understand how, because the last time I had heard or seen René he was the picture of poverty. Poverty city. Yet here he was taking us to all of these fancy restaurants. I asked him what his secret was – did he fall into an inheritance? And he took us into the local bookshop, and there were rows of **Asterix** books."

Kurtzman's projects after leaving **Mad**, even though they would prove to be enormously influential on a generation of new artists, weren't in general commercially successful. **Trump**, edited by Kurtzman and published by Hugh Hefner, lasted only two issues. Other Kurtzman-edited magazines, **Humbug** and **Help!**, lasted a bit longer, but neither of them achieved the same level of popularity as **Mad**. **Help!**, however, as has been mentioned before, would at least feature some of the early work of artists like Robert Crumb, Gilbert Shelton, and Terry Gilliam, all of whom admit to being influenced by Kurtzman's humour work. (Although his humour comics are most often cited as influences by underground comics artists, Kurtzman's war comics, with their emphasis on historical accuracy, also influenced works such as Jack Jackson's series of books dealing with Texan history, and even Art Spiegelman's **Maus**.) Most of Kurtzman's time was eventually to be dedicated to **Little Annie Fanny**, a strip that he created in 1962 with Will Elder for Hefner's **Playboy**, and his attempts to create new anthologies ceased (one exception was the paperback **Nuts!** anthology published by Byron Preiss during the 1980s; it isn't as significant as Kurtzman's earlier anthologies, despite featuring work by artists such as Rick Geary, Bob Fingerman, and Chris Browne).

Kurtzman always tried to break free from the format of the typical cheaply-produced American comicbook; in interviews he would describe with admiration how



Goscinny had managed to publish his own work in higher quality books and magazines which appealed to a broader audience than the one reached by the distribution system of North American comicbooks. Even though the content of Goscinny's work may not have been obviously influential in Kurtzman's work, Kurtzman did see new possibilities in the European model of publishing and distributing comics – a model which Goscinny shaped to a significant degree, thanks to the hardback collections of Asterix's adventures, which would prove to be a model for other European strip publishers. Kurtzman was particularly interested in the idea of publishing comics in formats that would make them more attractive to a public that didn't buy comics on a regular basis, and saw this as an important factor in helping comics gain more respectability in his own country. As we have seen, though, his repeated attempts to do something similar weren't successful (besides the magazines already mentioned, he also tried his hand with paperbacks that either featured new work, like **Harvey Kurtzman's Jungle Book**, or that reprinted material from the magazines he edited). Maybe he would have tried to do this even if he hadn't been aware of Goscinny's success in the French comics industry; but doubtless seeing the rows of **Asterix** books that had made Goscinny a wealthy man at least helped to point Kurtzman in that direction.

In Goscinny's work in turn, we can find examples of Kurtzman's influence. For instance, he created, together with artist Marcel Gotlib (who also admits to a strong Kurtzman influence on his work, and who later contributed to Kurtzman's aforementioned **Nuts!** anthology), a series called **Dingodossiers** which was deliberately based on **Mad**'s style

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of humour, with no recurring characters but exploring a different theme humorously in each episode. This series was created for **Pilote** in 1965, and in its various episodes we can find elements that could easily have appeared in an issue of **Mad**, such as movie parodies and comparisons between history and the version of it shown by the movies. (An important component of Kurtzman's work was showing how the media manipulated truth for its own purposes; his motivation for doing his war comics was similar.) The series lasted for three years, after which Goscinny decided to concentrate on his more famous series (**Asterix**, **Lucky Luke**, **Iznogoud**), and Gotlib continued to do work on his own.

In his role as director of **Pilote** Goscinny supervised the work of a whole generation of French artists and was also responsible for creating, in 1968, the "reality pages" ("actuels") of the magazine where younger artists could experiment with humorous journalism, satirizing current news and events (again, the influence of Kurtzman's **Mad** can be seen). There may be some objection to the importance of Goscinny's role in this, since it was in fact not the result of a completely smooth transition, but more of a reaction to circumstances; the young artists of **Pilote**, besides being interested in forming a trade union movement, accused Goscinny of restricting the magazine's contents and not allowing them to express themselves in their own voices. But even if the case could be made that Goscinny was forced into it (instead of coming up with the idea without any external pressure), his solution allowed those artists to do new work aimed at a more sophisticated audience, gradually changing the whole tone of the magazine. (The reaction to this change wasn't entirely favourable; Albert Uderzo felt that the young artists "ruined" the magazine.)

The period during which Goscinny lived in New York was the only time when Kurtzman and Goscinny worked together, but it is tempting to imagine what other projects they might have collaborated on if Goscinny hadn't returned to France in 1951. Would Goscinny perhaps have worked as a cartoonist for **Mad**, or as a writer/editor for EC? The only actual examples of their collaboration that we can find are the children's books, which are of very minor importance when compared to the work they did later on, and the **Oumpah-Pah** strips that Kurtman translated in 1952. But despite their having separated after this, we can see that in some senses Kurtzman and Goscinny followed similar paths (without forgetting that there are some significant differences: unlike Goscinny, for example, Kurtzman didn't become wealthy as a result of **Mad** or any of his creations, showing how different the comics industries of Europe and the U.S.A. could be). And, as we have seen, there was a mutual influence between them in some respects.

Both Kurtzman and Goscinny ended up being exceptionally influential authors in their own countries, with an influence extending outside their respective comics industries. Even if readers may not have been aware that **Mad** was created by him, Kurtzman's work as a cartoonist was seen regularly by an adult public, thanks to his **Little Annie Fanny** strip for **Playboy**; and Goscinny, besides reaching a large readership thanks to **Asterix**, had an important visibility in French society, due to his participation in mainstream magazines and French television shows. They also ended up being discoverers of, and sources of inspiration for, well-known comics artists. Their most famous creations, **Mad** and **Asterix**, are known by people who probably have no idea of who Kurtzman and Goscinny were, nor of the important role they played in comics in general.

Inevitably, despite their influence, both Kurtzman and Goscinny eventually became symbols of the past, to be displaced by younger talents and new styles. Kurtzman's work from the end of the 1960s up until his death in 1993 is clearly inferior to his older work, and a large part of what underground artists did was incomprehensible to Kurtzman, particularly their apparent disdain for commercial success (which was something very important for Kurtzman and for any artist of his generation, who, unlike the younger artists, usually had families to support). Goscinny also discovered that the French comics industry had significantly changed, particularly when the group of **Pilote** artists confronted him in 1968, feeling themselves limited by the constraints and conventions that he had helped to maintain during his whole working life. In both cases, the comics industry moved on, but in large part due to Goscinny and Kurtzman's work and effort in helping shape the careers of younger artists. Besides all this, their work still has an important place in the history of comics and, unlike the work of other artists of their generation, much of it is still available today.

Goscinny's best-known works, such as **Asterix**, **Lucky Luke** and **Iznogoud**, are available in French and many other languages (all the **Asterix** albums are available in English, for example), but there are also French editions available of other Goscinny comics such as **Dingodossiers**, and the **Archives Goscinny** series of books which reprints some of his lesser known works. Almost all of Kurtzman's work for EC is available, either in Russ Cochran's deluxe black and

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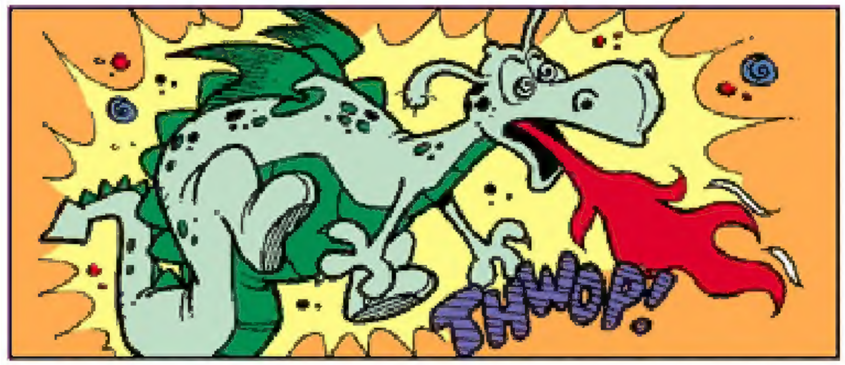
white hardbound reprints or in less expensive formats such as Gemstone's colour reprints of **Two-Fisted Tales** and **Frontline Combat**, and DC's colour reprints of the first 23 issues of **Mad**, all published within the last decade). Kitchen Sink published book editions of other works, such as **Harvey Kurtzman's Jungle Book** and **Goodman Beaver**, which may still be found through used book dealers; and while Kitchen Sink no longer exists, Denis Kitchen is still working on getting more of Kurtzman's work back into print, including Dark Horse's complete reprint of **Little Annie Fanny**, and his own edition of **The Grasshopper and the Ant**. I encourage anyone familiar with **Mad** or **Asterix** (to name only the most famous examples) to look for more books by these authors, in order to acquaint themselves better with the work of two of the most important and influential creators in comics.



Brazil, Brazil

Phil Hall begins a 3-part Brazilian overview with Mauricio de Sousa, the Latin American Walt Disney.

MAURICIO de Sousa Productions is a Brazilian children's comics enterprise which just happens to be the world's fourth largest art studio. Despite the UK, USA and Japanese comics industries still suffering from struggling sales, not all countries with comics traditions are finding it tough going. In fact, one character is so popular in her native Brazil (and other Latin American countries) that sales of her comics eclipse US market leaders the X-Men. Mônica, a pint-sized, buck-toothed, bright little girl, is the lead character of Mônica's Gang, a collection of cartoon characters modelled after real children between the ages of 5 and 10. The eternal rivalry between boys and girls to lead the gang gives rise to lively, action-filled stories starring Mônica and co-star Jmmy Five.

Mauricio de Sousa - a Brazilian cartoonist, animator and filmmaker, the creator of these and some 200 other charismatic children's characters – has been creating comics for nearly 40 years, building a comics empire which has earned him the title of "Walt Disney of Brazil".

Mauricio de Sousa Productions' strength began with newspaper strips and comic books, read by almost every Brazilian in the country at some time in their life. Today, in a nation of some 165 million, the 11 titles of Mônica's comic books currently add up to a nationwide distribution of 50 million copies a year and are read by an estimated 24 million readers a month. This represents over 75% of the children's market in Brazil. Just as significantly, a 1997 Gallup Institute survey found that 58% of the readers of these comics were over the age of 18.

In addition, MSP is strong in areas such as licensing, animated cartoons, theme parks, promotions, live shows and cultural projects, as well as a 10,000-page free website with over 90 million hits per month at www.monica4kids.com or www.monica.com.br.

In 1998 MSP signed a contract with Globo TV in Brazil for the production of a daily TV program and a full length animated *Mônica's*

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Gang film. MSP now holds 70% of the children's licensing market in Brazil, a sector that has grown by nearly 500% in the last seven years. As stated, the MSP studio is the fourth largest art studio in the world, employing some 200 full-time artists.

Mônica's Gang comics are published as Sunday pages and strips in over 100 newspapers. They also appear on the award winning 6,000-page website which includes strips, comics stories and longer, serialised comics. The site is updated weekly and has had over 40 million hits since its inception.

The Mônica's Gang characters have appeared in comics in magazines in Latin America, Europe and Asia, published variously by Editora Globo, Abril, Best, Nova Fronteira, LP& M, Hemmet Journal, Hjemmet Bladforlaget, Ehapa Verlag, Gutenberghus, Egmont Publishing, Editorial Cinco, Perfil, Planeta, Recreativas, Editora Sanrio, Psaropoulos and others. Worldwide interest in Mauricio's work is steadily increasing. The fact that it has been translated into as many as 13 languages in 38 countries attests to the international appeal of the stories and the characters.

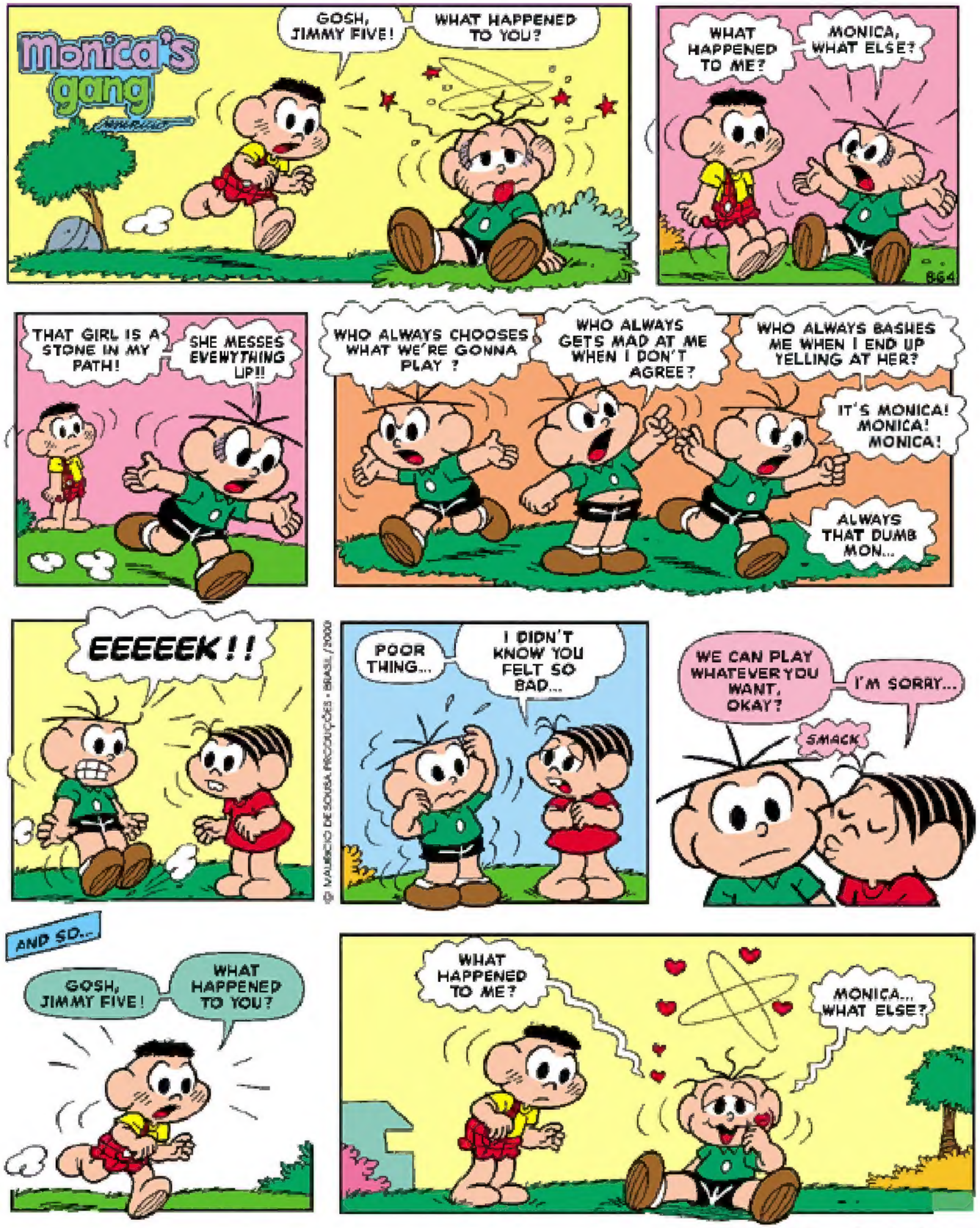
The MSP film library currently includes 15 videos (13 animated cartoons, 2 live-character stories) and *Mônica's Gang* vignettes totaling 600 minutes of full animated cartoons.

In addition, Mônica's Gang is present on some 3,500 licensed products manufactured by over 100 companies; in a growing series of animated films, videos and CD-ROMs; in theme parks designed mainly for children (the largest indoor parks in Latin America, now in Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro); in storybooks and activity books.

Brazil may still be suffering from the throes of recession, but MSP is flourishing. International vice president Yara Maura Silva told Borderline, "The economic crisis has affected all countries, and Brazil, which had managed to stabilise its economy for a few years, is being hit by it, as you are surely aware through the world news. Nevertheless, sales of Mônica's Gang comics continue to be strong, with the 11 Mauricio de Sousa titles in the 11 top slots for sales, which currently average a total of 50 million copies a year."

Not content with sewing up the market in Latin America, Mônica's Gang has made its presence felt as a world player in toys. MSP remains a cross-marketing gold mine for de Sousa (*self-portrait, left*).

Pictures: Right: A complete Sunday paper strip which gives a good indication of why Mônica is so popular among all ages! Previous page: Mônica as a dragon from another strip; a photo of Mauricio de Sousa and a Mônica "family" shot! BL



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INDUSTRY STANDARD

Phil Hall's look at the people and the publishers shaking up the comics industry

IT suddenly dawned on me, shortly after finishing the last issue of Borderline, that I'd been reporting on the comics industry for getting on for 25 years – my first "news" column appeared in Thing Comics Advertiser back in the spring of 1977 – and that it has never been more competitive than it is at the moment.

Fandom matters

Once upon a time, there was a widely dispersed mass of disparate fans all working tirelessly, for nothing, to get as many people as possible clued up as to what was happening in comics in the coming months. Fanzines would come out, and these would be the only source (apart from the occasional tease in a letters page) of what was likely to be happening in the months ahead. Then professional magazines came onto the scene and, basically, the ethos stayed the same.

But at some point in the last five years, reporting on the industry has become as lucrative in some people's eyes as the comics themselves. Fair enough, we live in an economics-driven world, and if you can make an extra buck out of the punters with your sideline venture, then business sense says you have to be applauded. But at what expense?

"Hits"! It's all about "hits". The Internet drives the infrastructure of the comics industry now, especially the commercial side, and therefore fans can't even attempt to do something in appreciation or for their fellow fans or, damn it, even for themselves, without someone or some organisation attempting to flatten them or slap them in line. As the Internet begins to set some legal precedents in motion, specifically based around copyright, this entire innovative technological breakthrough starts to look unappealing.

As far as *all* commercial sites are concerned, if you don't get a lot of hits on your own pages, you're not getting the revenue. But if someone else is getting hits on their pages, using "stuff" that belongs to or has originated through your company, you're likely to get a little concerned that this could be an infringement on your copyright. But, if these sites are non-profit making sites – fan sites – that are only being produced because of a specific fan's love of a character or a company or a writer or artist, where's the harm? Where's the loss in hits? If Joe Public visits Ajax Comix's Fishman site, he's probably already been to Ajax Comix's own website. If he wants to look elsewhere for other fans, opinions, stories, whatever, why prevent him from enjoying Fishman worldwide and cause him some annoyance with the publisher of his favourite comic? Where is the gain in that?

A positive approach

So, it was great to see Marvel getting all affiliated with fan sites (even if the paperwork could be argued to be a little extreme). The people at Marvel have realised that there isn't a financial gain to be made from these fans – but a huge surge of goodwill, street cred and the chance of being seen to be less corporate and more conscientious could be generated. It seems that for once the people actually running the public face of a company have managed to rein in the corporate suits who just see one of their images being used as an infringement of copyright and therefore, quid pro quo, of financial benefit, requiring a "hands off" message to the user – and to everyone else.

I was harping on about "innovation" in last issue's *Industry Standard*. Well, publishers working with the fans for a better industry is as good an innovative move as many seen in recent years. But, it's almost simplistically obvious. The publishers are looking back to the halcyon days when the bond between themselves and the fan was strong.

In the best interests?

Too bad that the same "working together" spirit isn't carried on by the independently run news websites, which now believe that the reporting of the news is as important as the news itself! Why? Because of "hits". There's a paranoia that permeates the news sites which is almost unhealthy, to the point where it is becoming obvious that it's no longer the comics industry that appeals to these webmasters, but what they can make out of it. The spirit of fandom was one of sharing and spreading the word – whether by fanzine or by word of mouth. Now, these news sites would almost rather you forgot about the comics as long as you read about them on their sites! Surely if the publishers can work hand in hand with the enthusiasts and fans, then why can't these people? BL

Phil Hall has been involved in the comics industry since 1976. He introduced comics bags to the UK in 1977 and took over as editor of the respected fanzine Media in 1978. After a break of nearly a decade, he returned to comics in 1989 with Squonk!, his comic store. He also returned to comics magazines and created Movers and Shakers for the fledgling Comics International, and moved on to become News and then Features editor for the UK's leading comics magazine. He has also worked for DC, Marvel UK, and contributed to a number of comics magazines including Overstreet, Tripwire and Comic World, some now defunct. He also runs a successful multimedia company.

BORDERLINKS

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50mm x 40mm £15 ($25)
Banner - 10mm x 275mm £30 ($45)
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£350 ($500)
contact Phil Hall (details page 16)

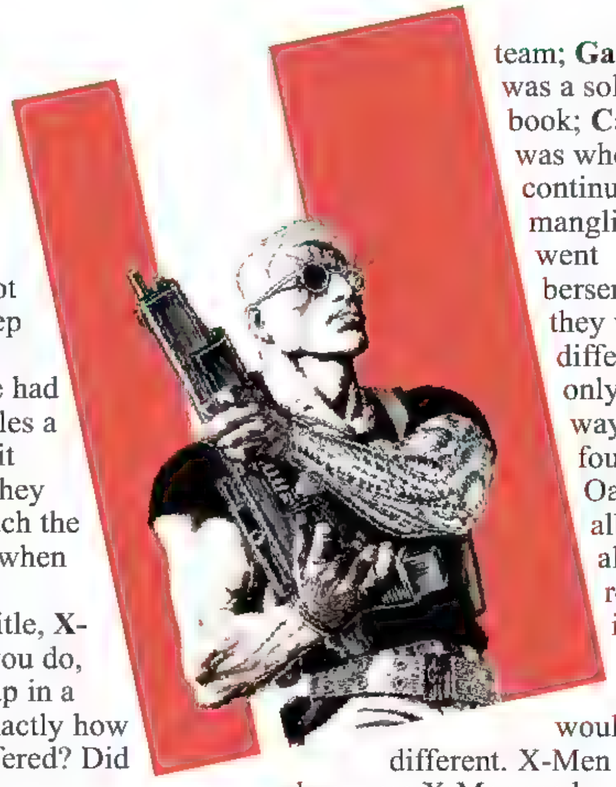
GOING TO X-TREMES

Jenni Cole explores the world of the mutants

IF YOU haven't been bitten by the mutant bug, it's never too late to start. Now that the dust has settled on the latest revamp of the X-Men line, Jennifer Cole takes a look at Marvel's new approach to the fan-favourite superheroes.

Somewhere back in the 1980s, when **Uncanny X-Men** was just past the glory days of Claremont and Byrne but was nonetheless well established as the best-selling Marvel title, an editorial panel realised that what comics fans obviously wanted was more mutants. After all, DC had run more than one Superman title and often more than two Batman titles simultaneously for decades, and Marvel had recently experienced success with multiple Spider-Man titles – so why not try it with the current bestseller?

It worked. In fact, it worked so well that before long Marvel added another X-title, and another, and another … until, let's face it, the whole thing got rather silly. To keep up with all the X-books, you'd have had to read a dozen titles a month, and when it came down to it, they were all pretty much the same. Remember when **Uncanny X-Men** spawned a sister title, **X-Men**? Of course you do, but can you sum up in a single sentence exactly how the two books differed? Did they differ at all?



All the X-books were about a persecuted minority who tried to stop the world hating them and their kind. Past that, the variations were slight: **X-Factor** was the original team, or the government sanctioned team; **X-Force** was the younger and more in-your-face team; **Gambit** was a solo book; **Cable** was where the continuity mangling went berserk, but they were different only in the way that four new Oasis albums all released in the same month would be different. X-Men readers were X-Men readers and, at the end of the day, you could pick up anything with an X on the front and you knew what you were getting. But no matter how much you liked the basic concept (and there was never much doubt that readers did like it), did anyone ever need quite so much of it?

And there were some people who didn't like it at all, who simply kept the whole X-stable at arm's length. Marvel may have decided this was inevitable and written them off as potential converts, but there was another group too: the X-virgins. If you were a new comics fan and wanted to pick up an X-title for the first time, where did you start? If a friend told you his favourite comic was **The Authority**, or **Madman**, or **Young Justice**, or **Hellblazer**, and asked you to recommend which X-title he was likely to enjoy most, how would you choose? And therein lay a missed opportunity.

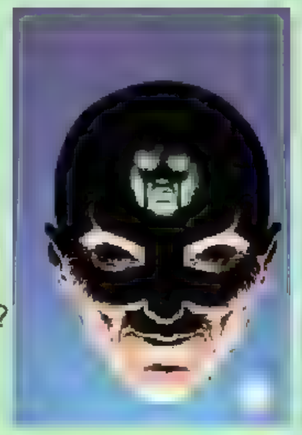
Wouldn't it be better to produce 10 very different books that might appeal to 10 very different readers? Could Marvel even poach readers away from other companies, such as DC or Image, by taking the risk of combining the power of the X-brand with a style and creators non-Marvel readers already liked? Could it be possible that each of the X-books could actually be given an identity of its own?

Four months ago, Marvel started to treat the core X-titles as if they were different books, aimed at different readers, for the first time. They cancelled some books completely, and restarted or revamped others with a very subtle and very

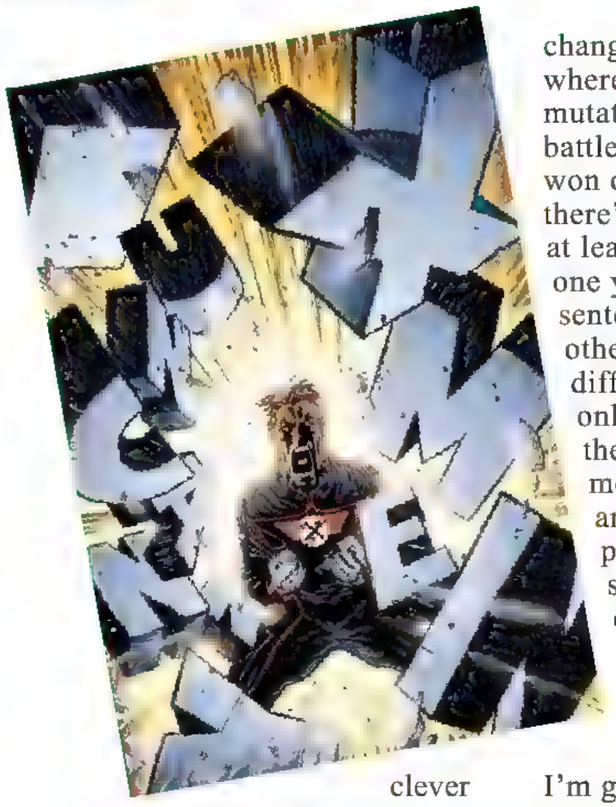
THOSE NEW X-BOOKS IN FULL

Or... what kind of X-Men reader are you?

NEW X-MEN
(or Just Imagine ... WildStorm published The X-Men)
By Grant Morrison & Frank Quitely
Morrison is at it again, scratching about inside the head of the superhero genre in the way that only he can. If you liked DC's JLA and WildStorm's The Authority, this is the X-Title for you. It's firmly rooted in superhero tradition and X-Men continuity, but with bitter, intelligent twists and freed from the editorial constraints that have so often strangled the X-titles. From the second you open the cover, you know this comic has NOT been produced by a committee more concerned with maintaining the status quo than telling a good story. The X-Men have sex – or problems getting it up. They kill – or get killed in droves. There's a body count that would have sent the Comics Code Authority into apoplexy; black, black, humour; costumes straight out of a bondage catalogue (you thought it was the movie? Ah, bless!) and a plot that moves faster and further in the first three issues than in three decades of Claremont. Best moment comes in the Annual (actually drawn by Leinil Yu): Cyclops, the man with the mutant power to out-angst Morrissey, has to talk-down a suicidal mutant who has the power to destroy the world by convincing him that life is full of joy. Pissing yourself with laughter as you look on? Join the rest of the X-Men, who react in just the same way. For comics readers who think conventions deserve a good kicking now and again.



X-FORCE (or Just Imagine ... Dark Horse Published The X-Men)
By Peter Milligan & Michael Allred
Take 1963 – the 12 months between 1962 and 1964, the year in which John Betjeman claimed sexual intercourse began *and* the Image pastiche – add in some pop culture and sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, shake, and make absolutely certain you stir. You know that if you had superpowers you'd be more interested in being a rich, famous, pop star idol-of-millions



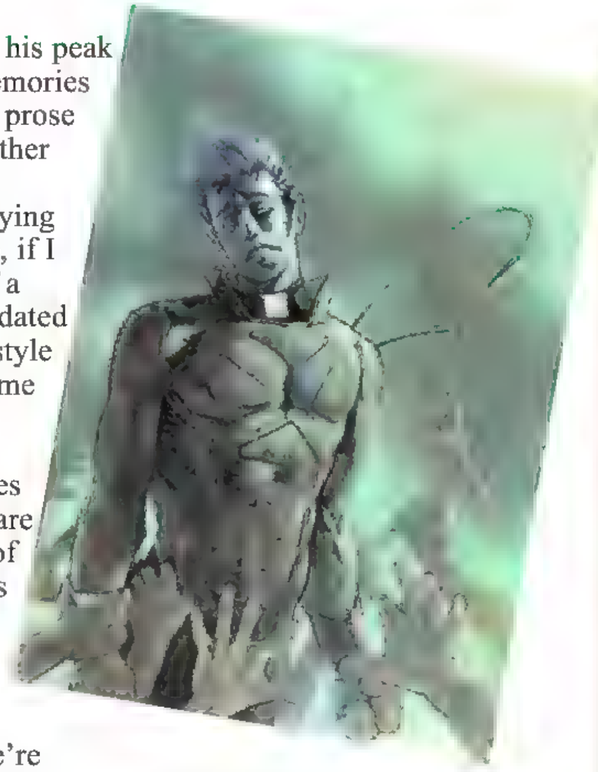
clever marketing vision. These were X-books for people who don't usually read X-books. Except the one for people who like the X-books just the way they are. Don't bite the hand that feeds *too* hard.

There are other X-books around too, outside of the core titles, and not all of them have changed, but the flagships are where everything has – ahem – mutated, and these are where the battle for new readers will be won or lost. And suddenly, there's a real difference between at least some of the X-books – one you can sum up in single sentences and explain easily to other fans. It's clever, it's different and it works. Not only that, but if you are one of the people who's been buying more of the same for years and enjoying it, even you've probably been pleasantly surprised by the change. I didn't even realise that anything was wrong and yet suddenly, simply due to a few changes of creative team, it feels as though I'm getting so much more for my money.

Of course, none of the comics are perfect, but together they cancel out each other's faults. The old fart fan in me would probably object to Morrison's lack of respect for the way things "should" be, if another part of me wasn't being reminded that my nostalgia for Claremont at his peak tends to wipe away the memories of just how overblown his prose was. I might question whether such pieces of the Marvel establishment should be trying (and succeeding) to be hip, if I didn't have the comfort of a monthly reminder of how dated the current Marvel house style looks next to the books some companies are producing.

So far, the experiment seems to be a success. Sales are picking up, the books are rising in the charts, word of mouth is spreading and it's very difficult to pretend you're bored with the X-concept anymore. Of course, there are those of us who never were, but we're being catered for too, and so everyone's happy. Now if only Marvel could figure out how to sell the X-Men to people who just don't read comics … oh yeah. That was the movie. And there's a cartoon as well? Those people at Marvel – they think of everything!

More importantly, three months after the revamp, Marvel have



more titles in the *Wizard* Top 50 than they did before. Not an enormous upturn, but it's growing. After all, aren't you curious? If you're not, you should be – for the first time in the history of the X-Men franchise, Marvel are making sure that they're providing something for everyone. Even *you*.

than selflessly swearing to protect a world that fears and hates you. You'd shag as much as you could, swallow all the drugs you could get your hands on, you wouldn't take no shit from a bald guy in a wheelchair, and … you'd still be a geek. But hey, what the hell, at least you know you're a geek and that makes you so much cooler than the guy in the Spawn T-shirt. Welcome to Marvel Comics as post-irony – sharp, bitter sweet, but deep down it knows what you are, and it's not trying to kid you. X-Force are the mutants who've sold out to The Man, selling their image for merchandising millions, putting their faces on TV chat shows, and … regularly getting slaughtered so they can be replaced by the next shiny new hero for the disposable generation. As long as there's an X on it, who really gives a damn? This beautiful, brilliant, almost perfect package is Strikeforce Morituri as a state of the industry in-joke. If you've always loved Allred's tender characterisation and Lee/Kirby sentimentality but wished Madman and The Atomics had substance as well as style, this is the one for you. For comics readers who're happy they know what dysfunctional really means.

THE BROTHERHOOD (or Just Imagine … Vertigo Published The X-Men)
By "X" & Essad Ribic
Welcome to Tales of Megacity Mutantville. Superheroes and Spandex and clean line art and codenames – that's such old hat. Setting stories in a kind of cod version of the real world, behind Sienkiewicz covers and photomontage and painted art and literary quotes from *real* books, and having a massive chip on your shoulder, is soooo much cooler, isn't it? Well, you're wrong, but Marvel are prepared to wipe your nose and take your money, so here you are – this one's for you. For comics readers who think superheroes are so uncool.

THE EXILES (or Just Imagine … DC Published the X-Men)
By Judd Winnick & Jim Califiore
Hey you there, over at the DC rack reading about the perky, cheeky young scamps like Young Justice and Impulse, and Superboy and their pals, having light-hearted fun in bright, primary colours without ever worrying about all that bad stuff in the world. And you, watching superhero cartoons on TV. Come over here and have a look at this. Marvel isn't all about angst, you know. For comics readers who think being a superhero would just be the best thing *ever*.

XTREME X-MEN (or Just Imagine … Marvel Published The X-Men, but it was still 1985)
By Chris Claremont & Salvador Larroca
100 word balloons a page. Strong women who strut about in virtually nothing shouting about their power being a song within them. Ludicrously knotted timelines and continuity you need a PhD in quantum physics to follow. Characters coming back from the dead. Subplots that go round and round and round and round in circles but never actually get anywhere, and then turn up again 50 issues later as if you'd never forgotten them in the first place. Angst and more angst and then some extra angst. God, those were the days! Marvel demote Claremont from overseer of the X-stable, leave him in the corner to do what he

likes and – bloody hell! – suddenly he's writing good X-Men stories again. At first glance, this is almost like a Claremont tribute band, almost like a Claremont parody and then slowly, gently, you realise that somehow, as if by magic, he's just clicked again. Of course it rambles. Of course the prose is purple. Of course the characters speak in endless, endless cliches. But didn't they always? And to think there are people who say you can never go home again.

For readers who complain that comics aren't as good as they used to be.

UNCANNY X-MEN (or Just Imagine ... Marvel published the X-Men)
By Joe Casey and Ian Churchill
What do you mean, there was something wrong with the X-Men? What tired old concept? What are you talking about? There are mutants in the world. The world hates them and persecutes them, but they don't hate humans back, because they're the good guys and we can all live together in peace, if we all try hard enough. Sometimes, other people gang up on less fortunate mutants. Never fear! The X-Men will fight for the underdog! And they're really good friends, and they can lean on each other when times are tough. Wolverine's a really great guy, y'know, under that tough exterior. They all are, and the X-Men is such a GREAT comic. Please, please don't change it – just leave it alone. Please.
For comics fans who really don't care that companies other than Marvel exist.

The others in brief:

Cable: Big guns and continuity bonkersosity continues. May well become lots more sensible – when David Tischman takes over as writer, or perhaps not.
Cyclops: Scotty-boy gets some more reasons to wallow in angst. Just as he likes it.
Iceman: Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning have won over the ultra-cult of Legion fandom; can they repeat the trick with the X-Zombies?
Mutant X: TV fans! Please buy comics – the industry needs you!
Origin: Can the "truth" about Wolverine's origins out-perform the thrill of the chase?
Rogue: She's a girl, lads!
Ultimate X-Men: Some people get intimidated by impenetrable continuity. They're called new readers and they're the future. Indulge them.
Wolverine: There really are people who still haven't had enough of Wolverine. Apparently.
X-Men Unlimited: A short story anthology which might just be the perfect place to sample the rest of the X-line's delights.

Jenni Cole is a self-confessed X-Men and superhero fan. BL

BLINKERS OFF

Mike Kidson delves into areas comics dealers rarely reach

Eric Stanton

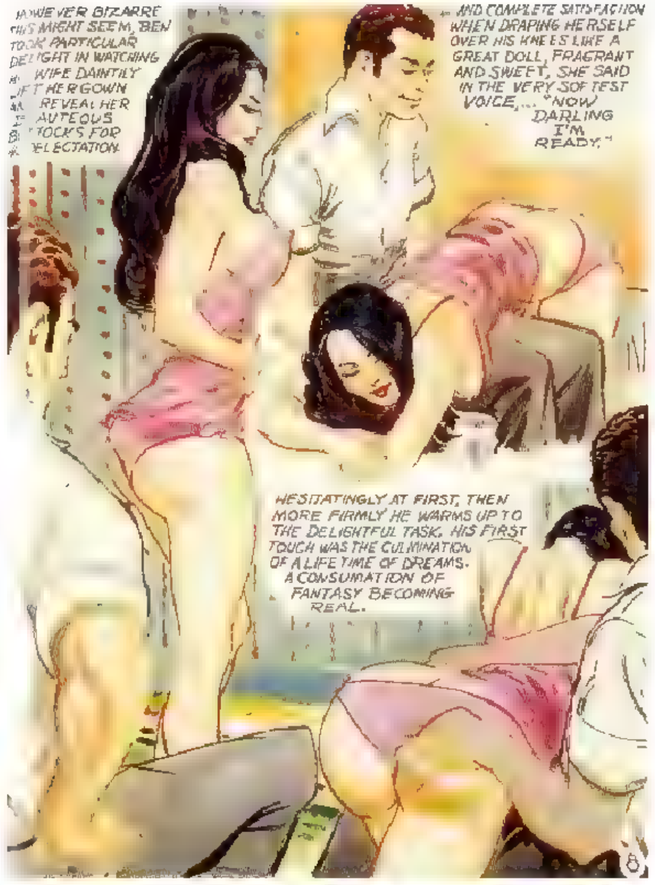
ONE OF the abiding areas of uncertainty in the world of English language comics is their status as an artform. Comics fans – and these days they constitute the bulk of the audience for American and British comics – tend to divide into those who prefer to think of the medium as a genuinely popular commercial one which should not aspire to being any kind of fine art, and others who insist that the trend towards trade paperback collections and stocks of the same in libraries and bookshops is a sign that the medium is now achieving high cultural recognition. Meanwhile, the non-comics reading public and pundits in general happily continue to think of comics as pablum for the kiddies, filled with Biffs, Bangs and Pows. Once in a while a comic may be accepted by the public. Examples by such as Raymond Briggs, Posy Simmonds and Chris Ware have been discussed in previous issues of **Borderline**, but it has also been noted that such exceptions to the rule are generally marketed not as comics but as hybrid literary items: "graphic novels", "illustrated novels" and so forth.

So it intrigues me that the work of one veteran American comics artist has found a secure niche in the fine art world of late. Collections of his comics have been published as art books and publicists describe him as "the Rembrandt of pop culture". It further intrigues me perhaps not one in ten of American or English comics fans has even heard of this artist whose work has achieved the recognition which so many of them feel is the medium's due.

There may be many reasons for that. Eric Stanton never worked in the mainstream industry (although some claim that he may have aided his then studio partner, Steve Ditko, in inking early issues of **Spider-Man**, and there is little doubt that Ditko influenced Stanton's drawing style). His comics were either published in the cheap and lurid men's magazines of the 1950s or self-published, and it is estimated that 90 percent of them were drawn on private commission – which, tellingly, is a traditional characteristic of fine art but not of mass-produced comicbooks

Perhaps more importantly, Stanton's subject matter was sexual fetishes – and comics about sex are, to most fans, taboo. The sexy cheesecake comics of the 1940s and 1950s caused a lot of trouble and long term industry-organised self-censorship, leading to generations of Anglophone readers believing that comics were most appropriately concerned with heroism, action and adventure (or, more recently, introspective examination of everyday life). Pornographic English language comicbooks certainly exist, and they sell very well – the Eros line of comics allegedly underwrites the output of one of the most respected of alternative comics publishers, Fantagraphics – but you won't find them listed in the Overstreet Price Guide. They are invisible except in the till receipts, unmentionable.

But even if that wasn't the case, there's another aspect to Stanton's comics which would probably prove displeasing to regular comics readers; by any of the usual standards which are applied to the critical assessment of comics art,



they aren't very good. Reading through the two lavishly bound paperback sized collections published by Taschen Books this summer – **Reunion In Ropes** and **She Dominates All** – one finds example after example of weak sequentiality, unimaginative panel design, visual inconsistencies, sloppy storytelling, casually scribbled backgrounds, stilted dialogue and spelling errors. Had Stanton attempted to find work with the mainstream publishers of comics he would doubtless have been turned away, perhaps at best been told to come back once he'd improved – yet his work is now respected by many who wouldn't give the time of day to a mainstream comicbook.

What do we make of this? True, Stanton's current reputation could have little to do with his skill as an artist and much to do with the vogue for the American erotica of the mid-century which has also made an icon out of photographic model Bettie Page. Additionally, his work may be seen as an investigation of a personal, private aspect of the human psyche and personality, and thus coincides with one of the preoccupations of current fine art; there may, for instance, be similarities of meaning between Stanton's visualisations of his clients' dominance fantasies and Tracey Emin's exploitation of her own life and body as an artistic statement. But I think there is more to be learned from the popularity of his work than merely that it is modish – and it is that the many differing purposes for which the comics medium might be employed may demand equally differing standards of aesthetic approach and appreciation.

English language mainstream comics, whatever genre they might fall under, mostly consist of fantasy stories, and while all conform to the medium's core set of rules concerning comics – left to right page sequencing, division of the page vertically into tiers, iconic representation and so forth – there is also a more detailed set of rules which has become more or less specific to different genres. So, a heroic action fantasy created primarily for a juvenile audience requires a certain amount of clarity and consistency mixed with "realistic" detail in order to communicate to its readership clearly and appealingly, and a certain amount of dynamism to give impact to the heroic nature of the content. A primarily humorous, "cartoony" comic requires even greater clarity and consistency because it conveys meaning through exaggerations of body language and careful line placement without being aided by the contextual support of "realistic" detail. These are by no means hard and fast rules – there are plenty of exceptions – but in general I think they can be applied to those comics which fans regard as the classics of mainstream comics, be they **Watchmen** or Barks's **Donald Duck**, Miller's **Dark Knight Returns** or Los Bros Hernandez' **Love and Rockets**.

If different kinds of content are generally associated with differing kinds of art, Stanton's exploration of sexual fantasy requires yet another kind of art, one which is not generally found in the mainstream, to which clarity and consistency are more or less irrelevant. Sexual fantasies generally consist of a climactic series of actions, drawn out to some length, described in minute detail and virtually independent of any surrounding reality. Clarity, consistency, "realistic" contextual detail, sequential flow, even dynamism; these are not characteristics of sexual fantasy, whereas intense concentration upon a central idea and its development to a climax, regardless of whether its context is clear or even logical, is very much the aim. And it is an aim which Stanton's vague, fuzzy, slightly mysterious and quite artificial depictions of weak, frail men being dominated and humiliated by strong Amazonian women fulfil very well. If we are to judge narrative art by how well it fits its subject matter, then Stanton's "rough" art is good

Whether it amounts to good *fine* art – well, that's another matter and one I shan't address here. But Stanton's comics have clearly struck a chord with an audience which does not generally respond to comics, a loud enough chord for them to be published and distributed in ways to which most mainstream English language comics can only aspire.

Increasingly, the most popular and successful mainstream British and American comics creators tend to write and draw what they want, regardless of whether there is or is not an audience that requests it. Eric Stanton spent his career drawing what he wanted, but also drawing specifically what his clients requested. Perhaps that's another reason why his work has achieved a breakthrough which eludes the mainstream's top talents?

Eric Stanton's ***Reunion In Ropes and Other Stories*** *and* ***She Dominates All and Other Stories*** *are among the Icons series of art books published by Benedikt Taschen Verlag (http://www.taschen.com) and available in most good bookshops.* **BL**

BURNING DOWN THE CURTAIN

Rich Johnston's controversial look behind the closed door of comics

Todd Story

TODD McFarlane. Bless his cotton socks. One of the fine men who broke away from mainstream comics which were full of work for hire and exploited labour and formed - Image Comics. Which published mainstream comics full of work for hire and exploited labour - well, quite a few of them did anyway.

So why does McFarlane come in for so much criticism... even more than fellow Image founder Rob Liefeld? Could it be the pictures of the toy sweatshop he proudly printed in Spawn and Angela? Could it be the power of the man who can turn the likes of Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, Paul Jenkins, Brian Bendis and others

from people happy to work for him into people who have sworn off him for good? Could it be the intellectual appropriation of creative work from the likes of Neil Gaiman or Lance Gueck (more on him later)?

A Miracle, Man!

It was reported in *The Comics Journal* this month that Neil Gaiman has decided to take legal action against McFarlane if, as is expected and solicited, Miracleman makes an upcoming appearance in Hellspawn. Gaiman claims McFarlane gave him all the rights and original film in exchange for complete rights to the character Cogliostro, which Gaiman created while writing Spawn. And then McFarlane's people told *Wizard* that McFarlane had never had the film at all to begin with.

We Know Where He Lives

There's the letter Amnesty International sent McFarlane when he released the Death Row Marv figure. Amnesty's letter included lines such as "The promotion of a "toy" that mocks a form of violence condemned by more than half the countries in the world today encourages disregard for the basic human dignity of all people." All fine and dandy, but still nothing about those sweatshops! I understand Amnesty received no reply.

Where It's Not Due

When Brian Bendis felt he couldn't write Hellspawn anymore and told this to McFarlane, he found he was also fired from Sam And Twitch, his true love project for McFarlane. To add insult, Bendis found his name attached to Hellspawn work he hadn't written and McFarlane refused to take his credit off when requested.

Lanced Boil

Lance Gueck was a friend of McFarlane before Image happened, and was often on hand to talk to McFarlane when the great man was discussing his comic work. McFarlane once had the pages of Spawn issue 1 drawn and laid out randomly in his home, when he called Gueck over with a specific request: to find a story. Basically, to rearrange those random pages into something that made sense and to write dialogue to go with it. Which Gueck did quite happily. The script was re-edited by McFarlane and others later, but about a third of the dialogue made it to the finished issue - as did a tiny "thanks" credit on issue 1. Gueck also gave a bit of background and character to two anonymous policemen McFarlane had drawn, naming them Sam and Twitch and giving them characteristics and backstory, all of which were used. For this, and for continual advice, dialogue writing and other functions, McFarlane told Gueck he could write a Sam And Twitch series for him. It never happened and soon McFarlane stopped returning calls.

Toy Story

McFarlane closed a number of offices for his toy company around the USA; he then announced the company was moving to Tempe, a suburb of McFarlane's home town, Phoenix, Arizona, in order to reduce employees even further and to pressurise them on salary and conditions. The previous September, however, McFarlane had given a big speech to his employees saying that he wouldn't do this, but may instead move people into a smaller building with less rent. Indeed, an external firm was commissioned to find such a property. Which is why many employees began to settle down, get mortgages, raise families, buy big trucks...

So why did many of McFarlane's employees find themselves polishing their resumés and filling in job application forms so soon after? Well, McFarlane Toys hadn't been doing quite as well as had been expected. Indeed, if it wasn't for the success of their *Shrek* merchandise, there might not have even been a company to save.

Tempe Ho!

I heard employees were given a week to decide whether

they would move to the new offices or leave the company. Larry Marder, acting as McFarlane's mouthpiece, returned when that week was up to get everyone's answer. Marder brought every person into his makeshift office and asked them if they were willing to accept the offers as written. Any attempt to compromise, counter offer, ask for clarification or request more time to make a decision gained the response "I'll take that as a No."

The word in the offices was that Marder's mission was to get as many "Nos" as possible, but make big offers to certain key staff to move down to the new set-up. And so McFarlane managed to cut costs and lay off staff without having to hand over big payoffs. However, some doubt the viability of his knowledge about who the

important people really are. As a result, many of those remaining feel hurt or insulted, and a large number are planning to leave - many of whom really do have the skills and knowledge that the company may well have needed.

Storage Eating

I hear they have 150,000 licensed toys from the flop Adam Sandler film *Little Nicky* gathering dust in a public warehouse in Seattle WA. At 50c per case per month, that works out at $6,250 just to store the figures every month. And these are figures that not only haven't sold yet, but probably never will.

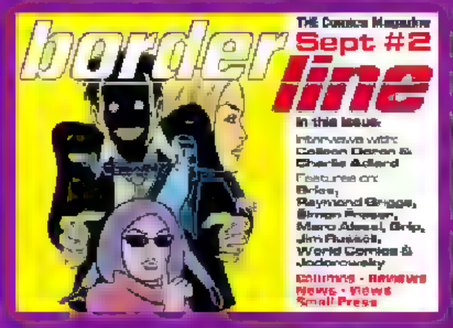
There were also big problems with McFarlane Toys' sports figures. Large licensing fees have to be paid to both the player on whom the figure is based and the player's association for each figure. These costs need to be added to the retail price of the toys but the key retailers in the toy market won't accept any price rises. However, McFarlane loves those sports dolls and pushed the company to expand the line of sports figures against the pleading of his financial people.

Toy Division

In happier times, about a year after the launch of McFarlane Toys, it appears Hasbro offered ten million dollars to purchase the company, along with the toy rights to Spawn. Financial advisors recommended that if McFarlane Toys opened a dialogue, they could get up to thirty million for the company. Indeed, Paul Burke, who originally financed the toy company for McFarlane before he was deposed, recommended this route. He suggested they use the money to set up another toy company with more of McFarlane's toy ideas, just not Spawn. Each of the (then) fifteen employees would also have become millionaires with the profit sharing scheme. But McFarlane didn't want to sell those precious Spawn rights.

That offer must look more and more attractive right now... with over twenty lines of Spawn toys created and a saturated market not that willing to bear any more. BL

REACH OVER 20,000 POTENTIAL CUSTOMERS THROUGH BORDERLINE



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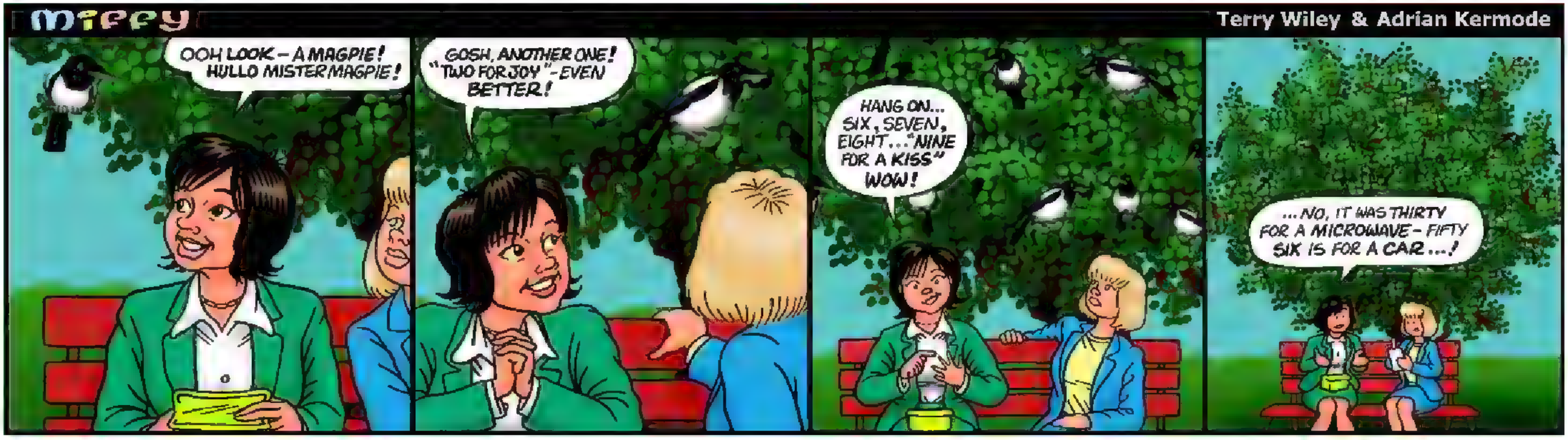


THE BLANK PAGE

Andrew Cheverton talks about... Gifted Children

I LOVE the concept of superheroes even today because I grew up reading them. However, it seems more and more that the majority of the adult world didn't, and they consider superheroes to be childish nonsense unworthy of our attention. It pains me to admit that I have to concede them their point to an extent, because there are two fundamental problems with superhero comics that render them largely inaccessible to the novice reader - namely, that they deal with alien concepts while using a unfamiliar language.

How many times have we heard instances of fans lending **Dark Knight** and **Watchmen** to their non-comic reading friends? When comics hit the big time at the end of the Eighties, these were the Big Two, not only in terms of mainstream sales but also in being so lauded by comic fans that they were the books always being loaned out to others in a superheroic diaspora.

I have only recommended **The Dark Knight Returns** twice. The first time to someone for whom I bought a copy based on her reaction to *Batman Returns*, where she liked the subversive quality and the theme of duality that runs through the film. This depiction of Batman interested her as an adult yet, despite this interest, she couldn't read **The Dark Knight Returns**. And I mean she couldn't read it at all; I may as well have handed her a 3-D comic without the 3-D glasses, written in Aramaic. She couldn't follow the panels of art correctly and was reading the captions out of order. If a full-page image occupied the left side of a page, she would try to read the rest of the panels on that page from top to bottom also. She was finding this difficulty in a book from one of our master craftsmen at what most would consider the height of his success. This is because **The Dark Knight Returns** is written in an obscure language, which we call comics. Imagine how embarrassing and frustrating it is for an adult - well read and intelligent, yet unfamiliar with comics - to be in this situation. What we consider to be flamboyant and exciting is simply unreadable to those who can't even tell what part of the page to look at first.

I have never offered **Watchmen** to anyone, which is a shame because **Watchmen** is, to a lot of people, the best we can offer. Who else will produce such a rich, multi-layered and rewarding comic about the validity of superheroes? It may well never happen. It says all that can be - or needs to be - said on the subject, and it says it in an adult fashion, without resorting to pointless posturing and fighting on one extreme and needless swearing and nudity on the other. And it is, in stark contrast to the frantic pyrotechnics of **The Dark Knight Returns**, conservatively laid out, with a traditional nine-panel grid (or variations thereof) all clearly tiered and almost elegantly simple to follow.

Except **Watchmen** has one small but fatal flaw; it makes little sense whatsoever to anybody who is unaware of the traditions and trappings of the superhero genre. If you have that Rosetta Stone of knowledge that allows you to understand how much depth and intelligence **Watchmen** has - on a mature level (but without losing that childlike innocence and sense of wonder that is so important to the tone - then it is a great and rewarding read. If you don't have that understanding, then it is a very long and silly tale of squabbling superheroes trying to kill each other. And that is disappointing; that the best we could produce should mean so little to everybody else.

The key to this problem lies with the simple yet adaptable minds of children. If you have children of your own, or the opportunity to watch them playing and learning, you can see that they adjust their play with little question and learn without the constraints of logic. They don't face the comic page methodically and with preconceptions of how stories are told; if they read panels out of order, they go back or they ignore it and move on. They almost seem to read the page haphazardly and then reassemble the story in their minds, in a fashion that is simply alien to an adult reader in the same situation. The very malleability of their learning processes allows this, in the opposite way to the rigid logic of an adult mind. An adult would resist learning to read comics in this way. To children the idea of Superman doesn't need substantiating; he is who he is, and his simple use of spectacles as a disguise makes complete sense to a child who believes that they can hide behind their hands. An adult would find this facile and ridiculous.

The vast majority of us reading superhero comics - teenagers and adults all - are doing so with abilities learned from childhood exposure. But comics are becoming scarcer to find at that young age, and their presence is dwindling. Soon there will be even fewer children that know what a comic is, or how to read it. The ghettoization of the industry, coupled with the preponderance of Adults Only and Mature Readers comics, is monopolising them out of the hands of children.

Many years ago, it was advertised that Comics Weren't Just For Kids Anymore: now they barely seem to be for kids at all.

We who were first exposed to the comics of superheroes at a young age are able to return to their world and communicate in their language. We understand superheroes, their origins and reasons, their foibles and idiosyncrasies, because they came to us in a more innocent and appropriate time: our childhood. We were better able to learn the language of comics in that time, free from preconceptions about how stories were told and in what form.

And we may well be the last generation ever to do that. BL

LEARNING CURVES

Sarah Littlehales speculates to accumulate

Too much of a good thing

FOR many comic book readers the pleasure of following the adventures of their favourite heroes is reason enough to buy their comics. The most expensive comics they might buy are perhaps back issues to fill in the gaps in ongoing stories. However, it's no secret that there's another breed of comic book collector - the investor.

That side of things started off when the prices of back issue comics began to rise, and the easiest way to invest in comics was to buy plenty of the new issues and save them until years later. By that time investors would leak one or two onto the market to create interest, and sell them off at a vast profit. Back then landmark issues would be ones which were hard to come by for the casual reader who bought comic books for pleasure. Tragic events (like the death of Phoenix), the debut of a favoured character (such as Uncanny X-Men #266, the first appearance of Gambit), and of course issue #1 of a brand new title often sell out due to the investors hoping to make a profit from the real fans at a later date. Prices fluctuate throughout the years, but essentially many of these comics stay collectable and desirable, therefore keeping the price up.

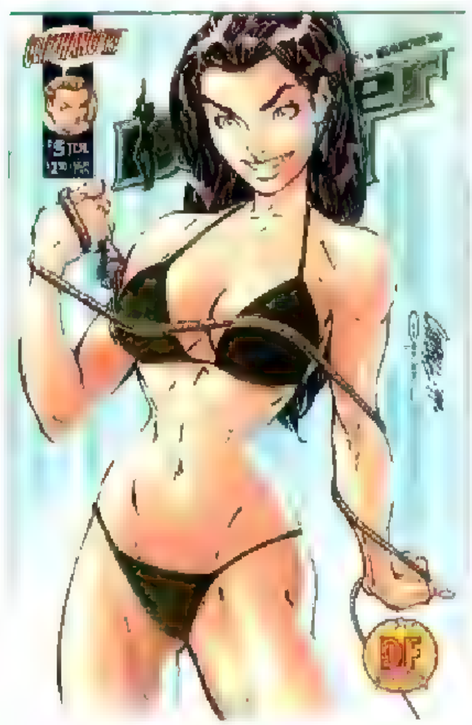
MUSEUM EDITION

Getting out of hand

Then, along came variant cover syndrome. Companies like Top Cow and Cliffhanger have utilised this greatly in the past, with issues of titles such as Tomb Raider and Battlechasers coming in a vast array of different covers to choose from. Naturally, the obsessive collector and the investor don't simply choose the picture they like the best. They buy them all... and not just once!

In recent years this new demand for variant covers has spawned further variations. Companies specifically churn out comics with a limited run of, say, five thousand with foil stamped logos or the writer's signature, or with a special holographic sticker to seal the bag. Without a doubt, though, the most popular of these limited style comics has remained the variant cover.

It seemed that there was a time when each new issue of Fathom or Danger Girl was incomplete without accompanying covers from Dynamic Forces, Another Universe.com, Monster Mart & co. It even got to the stage where Tower Records got in on the act! Each item cost around the £15 to £20 mark, while the regular version would have set you back a tenth of the cost.



Even Marvel now usually prints variants for the first two issues of a new series. They have a trademark 'white background' cover to follow up the regular cover. Famously, the 'white' edition of Ultimate Spider-Man #1 started to fetch onwards and upwards of £25! But as a word of warning to those who have little dollar signs popping up in their eyes, these 'white' covers were put out for almost every new series, including ones now cancelled, like Bishop and X-51. So you can bet that there isn't a lot of money in *those* covers.

Thankfully things seem to be settling down now, as you can buy issues of Witchblade and just about any Cliffhanger title with only the one cover.

But there's a "but..."

Just

'Just' is my favourite song by Radiohead. The thing is, the chorus keeps playing in my head when I think about this new breed of collectable comics.

"You do it to yourself. You do, and that's what really hurts. You do it to yourself. It's true, just you and no one else."

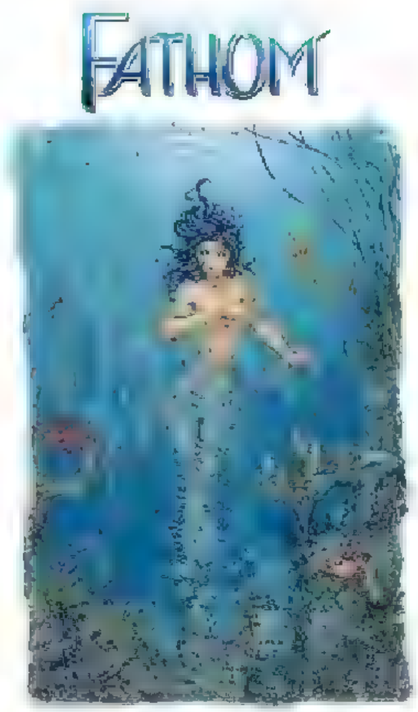
I can say that because I too have fallen for the 'limited diversity' that variant covers have brought us. When Campbell, Madureira and Ramos teamed up for the start of Cliffhanger, each produced a special limited chromium variant for each of their respective books. At the height of their popularity the Danger Girl variant could fetch nearly a hundred and fifty pounds, the Battlechasers one over £100, and the Crimson one a mere (by comparison!) £40. I could live without the first two, but I had to have the Crimson one...

But even I had to draw the line somewhere, and even I cannot believe how deep the pockets of some collectors go.

Morgue slab

If you peel open the holographic sticker that seals your Dynamic Forces limited edition you immediately devalue your purchase. However, for those of you who actually want to keep your comics in pristine condition there's a company here to help you for a princely sum. Comics Guarantee Corporation, more commonly known as CGC, officially grade your comics according to the condition they are in. Everything from the condition of the spine right down to the yellowing of the paper is considered. When they have graded your comic accordingly, they seal it in a slab of plastic, leaving it untouchable and rendering it unreadable.

Those of you asking 'What is the point of an unreadable comic?' have presumably never been to eBay.com. The point is, although 'slabbing' leaves the comic redundant of purpose, it does increase the value. For example, Amazing Spider-Man #15 (the first appearance of Kraven) can fetch over $1500 'slabbed'!



Forgery in the museum

What's more, Top Cow has recently teamed up with Jay Company Comics to produce the most expensive unslabbed variant comics. Printed on thick high quality parchment, 'Museum Editions' have an extremely low print run – one dozen. With so few in existence the price is immediately forced up and you can expect to pay at least two hundred dollars per issue.

As any museum will know there are some masterful forgeries waiting to sucker you out of your money. According to www.silverbulletcomicbooks.com's *All The Rage* there are some Ultimate Spider-Man Museum Editions from Marvel France and Marvel Italy. However, neither Marvel's Joe Quesada nor Bill Jay of Jay Company Comics, who produce all the Museum Edition comics, have ever heard of these variants...

So just be careful if you find a foreign Marvel comic Museum Edition – especially one that's been 'slabbed'. BL

ISSUES

Carol Close has many of them

IT was probably during the mid-80s that I realised I wasn't like other girls. While my teenage contemporaries fantasised about being ravished by Morten Harket, John Taylor and Limahl, I was always way more interested in the sex lives of superheroes. (And let's face it, I probably had more chance of getting a good shagging off Captain America than I ever did from the lead singer of Kajagoogoo, if you catch my drift.)

For me the sexual antics of super folk are endlessly fascinating. For instance, if Reed Richards is able to elongate and expand every appendage on his body, does he ever get the urge to slip Sue a sneaky length while she's taking a shower and he's tinkering with some scientific doohickey six floors up? And while we're talking about the Fantastic Four, does Johnny Storm have to take out insurance every time he sleeps with someone, just in case he shouts "Flame On" in the throes of passion and inadvertently brings a whole new meaning to the term "burning bush"? And, hey, don't even get me started on the Thing and his, er, thing…

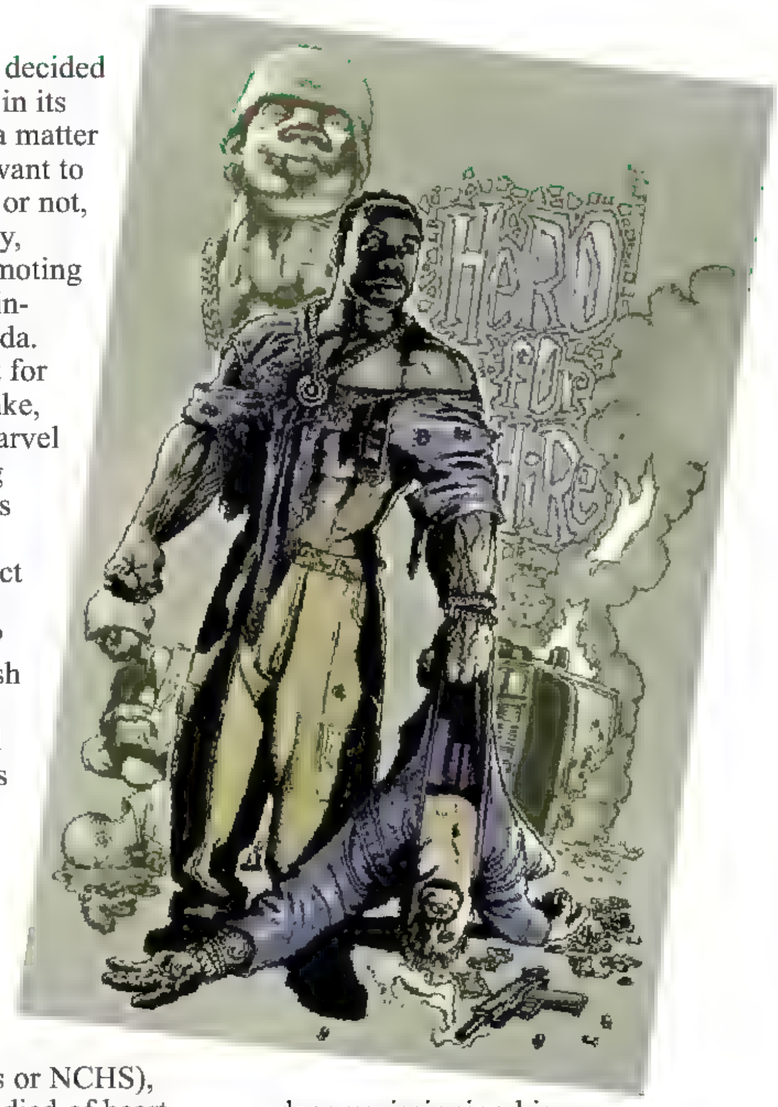
The point of all this pornographic procrastination is that we finally got to see a bonafide superhero knocking boots last month in the pages of **Alias #1**, the first fruit from the loins of Marvel's new adult-themed MAX line. Unfortunately, far from being the kind of exotic, cool and kinky sex scene I'd always imagined my girlhood heroes indulging in, it was grim, ugly and just plain nasty. Worse still, the character involved was Luke Cage, aka Power Man.

Writer Brian Michael Bendis, it seems, has given Cage a very 21st century personality 'reboot' that leaves him about a million miles away from the character who spouted jive, hung out with the Fantastic Four and used to ponce around in that ridiculous yellow blouson, chain-link belt and funny metal headband in the `70s and `80s. Back then Cage would say stuff like "Aw, shoot! Sucker, only one a'these bags I was carryin' is mine… an' you just tagged it!", and leave all the thinking to his partner Iron Fist while he got on with the important business of cracking skulls. Unless Marvel was happy for Cage to be remembered as little more than a comicbook version of Mr.T, clearly something had to change.

Sadly, Bendis has merely substituted one set of black stereotypes for another - the slow-witted, Uncle Tom Cage suddenly transmogrified into the kind of black man who uses the word "nigga" and is happy to take sexual advantage of a friend - **Alias**' female protagonist, Jessica Jones - when she's depressed and drunk. The fact that the sex scene in question clearly implies that Cage and Jones indulge in anal intercourse just makes things worse, as if the former Power Man is on some kind of power trip, cheerfully debasing a white woman already lost in a "dark night of the soul". Here we see the black man as brutish predator and sexually promiscuous opportunist, the kind of images which have long been used by racists the world over to frighten and stigmatise. It's also the kind of negative, nihilistic nonsense that oozes out of gangsta rap records and informs the appearance of practically every young black male on TV cop shows and in macho action movies. For a company that, even in 2001, still has so few prominent black characters in its books this is irresponsible and tawdry storytelling.

***

I note with barely concealed mirth that Marvel has decided to ban smoking in its titles. "It's just a matter of whether we want to promote cancer or not, and quite frankly, we're done promoting it", says editor-in-chief Joe Quesada. Umm, okay, but for consistency's sake, how about if Marvel stops promoting other behaviours that can have a detrimental effect on human life expectancy too?



Why not banish the eating of hamburgers and other fatty foods from their titles? After all, according to a Federal Government agency (the National Centre for Health Statistics or NCHS), 724,859 people died of heart disease in 1998, making it by far the single biggest killer of US citizens (cancer runs in second with 541,532 deaths). And why stop there? Perhaps Quesada should consider banning his characters from driving cars, too? The NCHS says that 4.08 million US citizens visited hospital emergency departments in 1999 after being involved in "motor vehicle accidents", and that in 1998 there were 43,501 fatalities resulting from road accidents. I'm also presuming this new puritan tone will be bad news for the Punisher, and that he'll be decommissioning his arsenal of guns at some point in the near future - especially in view of the NCHS' statistics which show that, in 1998, 30,708 Americans lost their lives in incidents with firearms.

It also seems a little rich for Marvel to ban smoking while giving a fairly explicit okay to the notion of using violence to solve problems. Or is the House of Ideas about to launch a new line of pacifist comics in which Spider-Man, the Avengers and Wolverine sit down and reason with evildoers over a café latte and light finger buffet?

BL

COMICS MILESTONES

Mike Kidson's look at the history of comics

IN 1775 the German author Johann Casper Lavater published a series of essays on physiognomy which, in successive editions and expansions, had an enormous impact on the European culture of the nineteenth century. Goethe and Balzac were impressed by Lavater's principles; so, to a degree, was the Genevan schoolmaster, author and artist Rodolphe Töpffer, whose own Essay on Physiognomy was the first conscious effort to outline a theory of purpose and effect in the art of comics.

Lavater's work basically argued that a series of relationships between appearance and character permeates the entire natural world; so, for example, as a cow is slow and lazy and has large eyes and a broad nose, thus people with large eyes and broad noses are likely to be slow and lazy (1). Although as a precursor to psychology this might now seem laughably simplistic, it offered to artists a system which could be represented visually so as to create an impression of character which would be widely understood – in effect, a refinement and extension of the art of caricature. And that system is still being employed by artists today, in film, television and animation as well as in comics. Although narrative context and speech patterns add a great deal to our understanding of characterization, in purely visual terms a fictional character's facial structure, mannerisms and posture offer important clues to their character, even if such clues may tell us no more than whether they are heroic or villainous.

Töpffer's essay is largely devoted to an investigation of how the cartoonist may combine physiognomical traits – which he divides into the "permanent", that is, the physical structure of each part of a subject's face and body, and the "non-permanent", i.e., the body language of expression and posture – in order to create both predictable and unexpected characterizations which might equally be decoded with ease by the viewer. Where Töpffer departs from Lavater's model is in stressing that it is the "non-permanent" traits which provide a true guide to character, whereas the "permanent" ones may be thoroughly misleading: and in this he took an important step away from Lavater's proto-psychological theory towards a definition of how visual chracterisation works in comics.

For an example, here's a sequence of three panels from Hergé's Tintin en Tibet. Tintin has one of the blandest faces in all comics – little more than a smooth oval in the shape of an egg, distinguished only by that little quiff of hair and the most sketchy features, apparently completely devoid of any character in terms of Töpffer's "permanent" traits. Yet in these panels we see how Hergé employed the Töpfferian "non-permanent" signs to imbue Tintin's nullity with unmistakable expressions of character – as he reacts to the news that his friend Tchang is believed dead Tintin is quite clearly first distressed, then in vehement denial and finally determined. All of this is conveyed, in line with Töpffer's theories, by small shifts of the few lines that make up Tintin's eyebrows, nose and mouth. The result is not at all representative of a real face; but, in Töpffer's words, "If I want to portray [expressions of emotion] I simply extract the linear signs which convey those emotions from all the others that might be intermixed or which would distract attention in a fuller representation."(2).

And there Töpffer refers to a topic he briefly touches upon which is beside the essay's main points but is of enormous significance in the art of comics. "In a painting where the handling is complex and sophisticated, a child will have difficulty making out the shape of a man, an animal, or some other object, but he will never fail to recognize it at once if it has been lifted out of its context by means of a simple outline and presented to him stripped of accessories and reduced to its basic features."(3) Although there may be other, historical reasons for the predominance of line art in comics, here Töpffer presents an aesthetic defence of it which still rings true. It may not be coincidental that comics which employ a clear and simple form of line art tend to be amongst those which have the broadest readerships: Tintin, Vandersteen's Suske en Wiske, Peanuts, many manga titles – but also Maus, Jimmy Corrigan and Ghost World.

Töpffer's Essay on Physiognomy inevitably misses very many points which are of great importance in the modern theory of comics; to name but one, it concentrates on the techniques of conveying character through drawing and omits the importance of other varieties of contextual information, such as text! However, Töpffer drew his eight "picture story" albums several decades before dialogue was definitively incorporated into the panels of comics, and employed text himself more as a witty glossary of the pictures which he intended to convey the burden of his narratives – and which narratives largely originated from his habit of sketching. So to criticize the Essay for not being comprehensive would be curmudgeonly; it is far more appropriate to praise it for its remarkable perceptiveness concerning the demands and effects of line drawing and characterization, and to recognize it as a significant milestone in the history of comics.

Notes

(1) adapted from Ellen Wiese's introduction to Enter: The Comics (the English translation of Töpffer's Essay on Physiognomy and Monsieur Crépin, University of Nebraska Press, 1965).

(2) Ibid., pg.8

(3) Ibid., pg.6.

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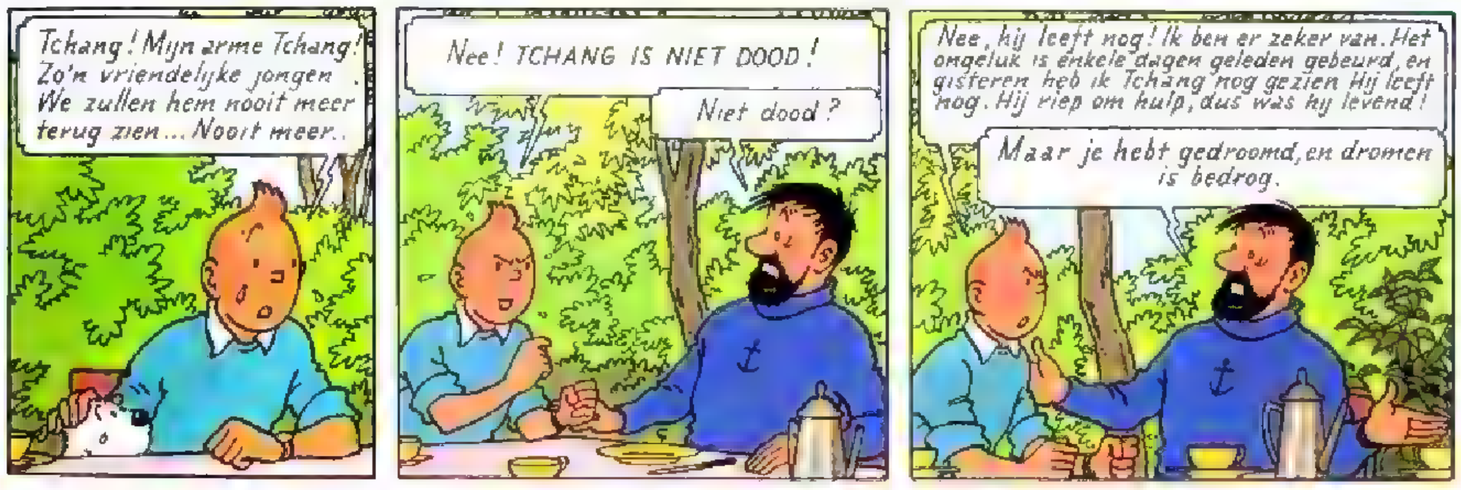


Above: Hergé's art demonstrates both the importance of expression over facial structure in defining character, and the communicative clarity of very simple outline art.

CONTINENTAL DRIFT

Kevin Schomburg's European odyssey for quality continues

The Land-Without-Evil

ETHNOLOGISTS study the behavioural aspects of a culture, primarily through field studies. Whilst doing so they face the problem that the mere fact of their presence already invokes change, as it is fairly difficult not to interfere, or at least be the focus of attention. On the other hand it is the main aim of a field study to get involved with the subject of interest, to get to know a people and their sociology as well and as closely as possible.

Sibran and Lepage's album **La Terre sans Mal** (The Land-Without-Evil) tells of the studies and experience of the French ethnologist Elaine Goldschmidt, who visits the Indian tribe Mbyas (a tribe in the Tupi-Guayaki culture) in the rain forest of Paraguay for the third time in February 1939. The Aché, as the Indians name themselves, are a dying people – the will to live has left them. Hurt by the European striving for cultural supremacy, they are deprived of their heritage and await the bitter and meaningless end of their culture. As Elaine notes in her diary: "The scientist always arrives after the dogs to pick up the rubble which has been left over for him by the conquistadors..."

The Indians ignore Elaine as they neglect themselves, and while she lives with the Achè she asks herself more than once about the reason for her stay. Elaine feels the urge to return to Europe until everything is changed by the arrival of the *Karaï*, a magical being rooted in Aché mythology, a prophet who will lead the people to the Land-Without-Evil. This place had been an integral part of Tupi culture even before the arrival of the European conquerors: it is a place without sickness and despair, without hunger and war, probably comparable to the paradise of Christian mythology. The prophecies about the Land-Without-Evil, which have motivated groups of Tupi like the Aché to undertake a search for this legendary place, may even account for the nomadic lifestyle of Tupi culture.

Elaine follows the Aché on their journey, only to find them dying by large numbers due to stress, severe undernourishment and confrontations with Europeans. At the same time as the war in Europe rages and her own people are being slaughtered in German concentration camps, Elaine has to experience the downfall of a people more than half a world away from her own. When the travels of the Indians lead her to a French monastery, she learns from her mentor in France of the events in Europe. He tells her not to return home; and finally Elaine is able to break free from the bonds which have all the while held her, and to fully embrace the culture of the Aché. She falls in love with one of the Indians and gives birth to a son. She learns about the Aché's mythology, and finally understands the urge and need to find the Land-Without-Evil. The end of the book sees five of the Aché reaching their destination, and Elaine returning to the civilization from which she came.

The book as a whole is a wonderful example of the possibilities comics have to offer when it comes to relaying information which is not at all important to the plot. Overall, one could say that **La Terre sans Mal** doesn't really offer much in terms of story. However, if the reader manages to see past the usual expectations, the sum of the book emerges as greater than its parts. How does a European woman experience the life of a South American culture? How do the Indians treat the scientist, eager to learn of their culture? What motivates the Aché and what do their prophecies proclaim? All this is asked and answered in the album. The intriguing set-up is rounded off by beautiful painted art, with fine attention paid to detail. Obviously Emmanuel Lepage has put great preliminary effort into researching the lifestyle and the ways of Tupi culture before he began drawing the book. The same can be said, however, of its author. In the preface Anne Sibran mentions that the comic does not emphasize ethnological accuracy, but at the same time she stays wonderfully close to the studies she has used as source material. The album also offers seven pages of Elaine's diaries as a primer, with handwritten notes and drawings by the ethnologist herself - a nice stylistic method of supporting the credibility of the album.

Although it is unlikely that ethnological comics will take off as a future sub-genre of comic culture, **La Terre sans Mal** is definitely an experiment which has produced a superb work within a specific scientific background.

***La Terre sans Mal** is a 63 p. hardcover album by Anne Sibran and Emmanuelle Lepage, published by Dupuis. At the Angoulême Festival International de la Bande Dessinée last year, it was awarded two prizes: the Prix des Libraires Spécialisés BD, and the Prix du Jury Oecuménique de la Bande Dessinée.*

More information about the Aché and the Tupi culture can be found in the works of Hélène and Pierre Clastres, *The Land-Without-Evil: Tupi-Guarani Prophetism* and *Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians* respectively.

BL

MAN ON A MISSION

Martin Shipp's vision of a better comics industry

The Hulk versus Thor yesterday

WITHDRAWAL

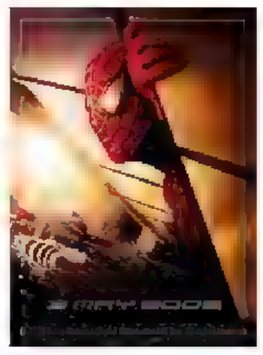
YEAH, all right, I've done the AA meetings or whatever the hell the equivalent is for people who stop reading comics. It doesn't work. You get nine, maybe ten people who not only have bad habits but who have bad habits, if you get what I'm saying, all in the same room, and do they sit listening intently to their fellow creature as he pours out his soul? Do they buggery. The first thing that hits you when you walk into that room – apart from the commingled smells of Lynx aftershave and BK Double Swiss – is the constant, under-the-breath susurration passing around and along, leaping from one to another like the bad guy in *Fallen*. Listen hard and you catch it, the same two syllables repeated and repeated, randomly angry, definitive or incredulous: 'Hulk!' 'Thor!' 'Thor?' 'Hulk!'

Keeping this painfully-wrested booze simile going, the quest to eradicate crap comics continues. At least, it does for me. Comics are a bit like alcohol, but in reverse; numerous pints of session lager can be got through in an evening and do no real harm but a steady intake of neat vodka will without fail turn you into Michael Elphick. Whereas a diet of small, strong shots of comics will do you a world of good compared to contracting metaphorical cirrhosis on a diet of the majority of regular-strength, regular-schedule books.

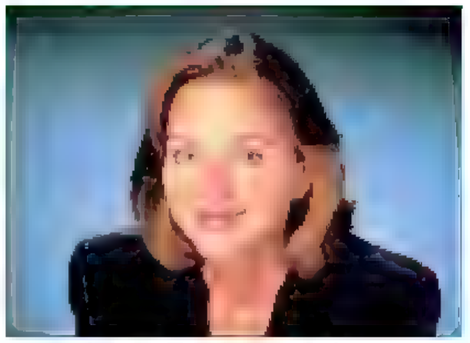
Michael Elphick yesterday

But that's not what concerns me this time round. What concerns me is the seeming determination of one sector of the medium's readership to prevent any interest from anybody outside the established circle of spandexheads. I'll tell you what brought this on, although it's been brewing for a while: I was in the video section of the local HMV (a chain of record stores, for the non-Anglos in the audience) and there were a couple of guys standing looking at the display box for the *X-Men* DVD. One of them's wearing an X-Men t-shirt, so I think I'm not wrong in assuming that he must be a comics reader and his mate probably is too. And the guy says to his mate something along the lines of: "I've never seen this film and I'm never going to". Says it with no small measure of pride, too, as if he were announcing that he'd just won the Nobel Prize for Good Taste in Movies. And when his mate asks why he's never going to partake of the film, the guy says, "Because they got his claws wrong. His claws don't come out from between his fingers".

Just grow up, will you? Just take what comes and deal with it instead of puking and mewling, eh? So what if Wolverine's claws came out from between his fingers in the movie? For that you refused to see it? So what if the SpiderhyphenMan costume is different in the movie? Will it actively kill you? Will it cause a safe to fall on your head? So what, so big enormous What, if somebody, say somebody in the newspaper or somebody on the TV, mentions a comic and gets something wrong? Are you going to piss and moan about it forever? What good will that do? Will Fox put an apology at the beginning of their other movies – "20th Century Fox, a News Corporation company, is truly sorry that we changed the costumes. Mr. Murdoch will now drink hemlock" – or will the BBC news carry a special statement at the end, like it has to when they call somebody a monkey-fondler and it turns out to be untrue? "The BBC would like to apologise for featuring a news report on the movie of *Spider-Man* without mentioning that the costume is a little different from the one in the comics. Anna Ford will now personally visit every Spider-Man reader in the country and administer extreme unction."



Spider-Man poster yesterday



Anna Ford yesterday

Here's an idea for my footage-spurning friend: how about, just for a change, seeing the offending item and saying "Blimey! More coverage for my beloved comics! And quite a positive piece too, with not a '60s Batman sound-effect or a speccy fanboy in a

Captain Corelli's Mandolin(s) and his friend yesterday

balaclava to be seen!" I mean, when Louis De Bernières saw the film version of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, did he burst into a tantrum because Nicolas Cage wasn't how he saw the character, or because the end wasn't the same as in the book? No, he just rubbed his hands together and thought of the extra people who would go and read his book, and of the extra royalties they would bring with them. He may have cried at the fact that it was a lousy movie, I grant you, but despite that small cavil, the film still opened a whole new audience to that book.

That could happen with the *Spider-Man* movie, if it's ever released, if the comics are marketed properly (and I do hope somebody at Marvel is preparing the biggest publicity push ever for when that film gets released, and I do hope that same somebody is realising that Stan Lee, sentiment notwithstanding, is probably the very worst person to be writing the adaptation). But, my friends, if you spend all of your time bitching about how they changed the origin, or how the reviewer in *The Observer* didn't understand the underlying tragedy of the character, then all that's going to happen is that some ill-informed snotbag of a journo will chance upon you and make a nice big "Let's laugh at the retard comic reader" piece out of your pain. Remember, it's like they said in *Singin' In The Rain*: "Dignity, always dignity".

Singin' in the Rain yesterday

Mel Brooks' The Producers yesterday

Previews: the comics quitter's version of the nicotine patch. Something that really pissed me off in this past month: seeing an Adolf Hitler Action Figure in **Previews**. I'm all in favour of bad taste; Mel Brooks' musical version of *The Producers* is rarely off my CD player. But there isn't a hint of camp or irony about this monstrosity. It's a however-many inches high doll of Adolf Hitler. In a raincoat, by the looks of it. Outdoor Adolf. One of a set no doubt, including Kristallnacht Adolf (with detachable Long Knife), Young Adolf (with realistic paintbrush and letter of rejection from the Vienna School of Art) and Final Solution Adolf (with individual can of Zyklon B). You find that offensive? That's how offensive I found this figure, with its little caution in the solicitation text of "not available in Germany".

This... *thing* is grouped with a clutch of other military figures; these others are Allied Forces personnel and again there's no element to these that suggests anything other than a straight reading of their purpose. So one can only assume that this is what it seems: a reproduction figure of Adolf Hitler, to be given the same treatment as, say, an Evel Knievel figure or one of those Kiss figures.

Now, I'm sorry, but this shows a failure of nerve on the part of somebody. There was a chance here to go for the full set of dictators and they just didn't go for that brass ring. I'd have loved, say, a Mussolini with optional lamppost. Where was the Hirohito? Or, more to the point, if you're going to do something that brave, that cutting, if you think it's cool or clever to reduce the most reviled figure of the twentieth century to something no more offensive than Barbie's friend Ken, and if you think it's perfectly acceptable to advertise and distribute that doll (not available in Germany), why don't you take a chance on offending people a bit closer to home, people who just may show their appreciation of your entrepreneurial skills by coming round to your house and lynching you?

This column's been a little intemperate. At time of writing we have no idea how many have lost their lives in New York, Washington, Pennsylvania. It gets to me that the distancing effect of history means that sixty years from now, or sooner, some scum will think it makes sound commercial sense to produce an Osama Bin Laden action figure, and the greatest tragedy America has ever seen will be no more than a business opportunity.

Thank you, and good night.

BL

... and the Adolf Hitler action figure addressing a nazi action figure rally... yesterday.

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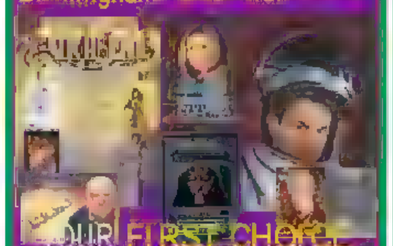


MITZY FANTASTICO

Who can truly say?

OOH, what a month, eh? Okay, so I've got a couple of things to blather on about this month. I don't want to go into great length with either of them, so I'll condense 'em both into one economy-sized article. Two for the price of one, eh? Now that's style! (*yeah, that's it Mitz, keep 'em distracted so they don't notice you've been making all this up as you go along again... heh, suckers...*)

Okay, first up - I actually *bought* comics this month. No, rilly, I did. Now, you lot out there may be thinking 'so bloody what? I get six billion titles each week!' while sitting on your computer chair made out of old copies of Astro City or whatever, but for me that's kinda a revelation. And by this I don't mean to say I'm some kind of comics cynic, sitting there re-reading V for Vendetta every nite and whining about how I'd never touch anything Marvel or DC ever do nowadays 'cos they're all *far* too commercial, I just mean I don't actually buy many comics. I dunno. I used to. Like, for ten or so years from my mid-teens to the semi-evolved state that I'm in now, I'd happily

spend between £10-20 a week on these shiny spandex adventures, and even the odd independent oddball comic, just to prove to myself I wasn't a total geek.

But somewhere at the start of this year, it all stopped. For some reason, no comics were interesting me. I blame that *Nativity* storyline from The Authority. That kinda killed superheroes for me, 'cos it was great. And kinda original. And it left me only reading one title - Usagi Yojimbo, which *always* delivers quality stories each month. But superhero stuff - man, what is with that stuff? I don't understand how it can happily pump out the same old shit, month after month, detailing all this crap that goes on in the mundane lives of some geezers in spandex, and what he's got to do with the new pointless villain this month's adventures bring him? And what's worse, why did I used to enjoy this sort of stuff so much?

Eh. Maybe I *am* just being cynical. Maybe I'm just getting *old*. Maybe I need to say the Green Lantern oath a few more times. *ahem*

***

And next on my list is something less anal, and, I have to say, something which really disgusts me. Okay, so, undoubtedly we've all heard about the attacks on the US trade centre. Of course. And I don't want to go into what a tragedy it is here, as I personally feel the media's beginning to trivialise the whole event, but just less than an hour ago, I read something on www.comicontinuum.com that quite, quite appalled me. One of their headlines for last week was WORLD TRADE CENTER, PENTAGON ATTACKED; COMICS COMPANIES IN NEW YORK UNHARMED. Excuse me? Comics companies unharmed? What?! Oh, so, it's all very well and bad that several thousand people died that day, but as long as we still have our spandex titles it's okay? Now, I don't mean this to sound like an attack on cc.com or make slurs on their staff or whatever, but I just think that headline and the article that followed were in extremely bad taste. Surely we should be equally as worried for everyone involved in the surrounding area, regardless of gender, race or their position in the comics industry? I understand them being concerned, but that really didn't need to be put in such a way. I'd like to think that the general comics-buying public aren't that selfish.

I know they most likely didn't mean it that way, but that's the way it came out to me. Eh. Maybe I'm just being mardy. BL

REGION ONE

Toys – Merchandise – TV Fantasy & Film – DVDs – Gaming – Computer Games

REGION ONE

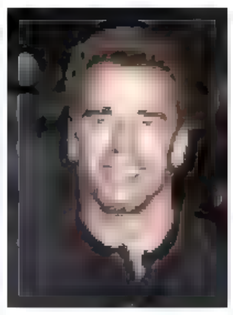
Matt Sommer looks at comics links in different media

AS I SIT writing this, it's been 12 days since the terrorist attack on New York City, and in a way it feels sort of silly and insignificant to be writing about the US entertainment industry. But after nearly two weeks of sorrow and hand-wringing and watching hours upon hours of horrific video footage, I think everyone (me included) is ready for a bit of mindless escapism.

With the end of the Cold War, the entertainment industry has been hardpressed at times to find suitable "villains" for its heroes. Since at least 1988's *DIE HARD*, the villain du jour has been the generic terrorist, and in fact the idea of "terrorists as arch-villains" has been used so often and to such a degree that it's become almost an industry cliché. In addition, being the prototypical American metropolis, countless movies and TV shows have been set in, or have prominently featured, New York City. In the wake of the attacks of September 11, and because of these two factors, the entire entertainment industry is in the process of scrambling to change or alter its content to remove any reference to terrorists or the World Trade Center. While I can definitely understand the impulse to be respectful of the feelings of those whose family members were lost, I have to say that the wholesale removal of any image of the World Trade Center from the media strikes me as a bit Orwellian - it should be immortalized, in my opinion, not erased.

MOVIES

Arnold Schwarzenegger's *COLLATERAL DAMAGE*, which had been set for an October 5th release, has been put on hold indefinitely. In the film,



Schwarzenegger played a fireman who sees his wife and son killed by a terrorist bombing, goes looking for revenge and uncovers further attacks on US targets. Warner Brothers has pulled all marketing and advertising, including billboards, one-sheets and trailers from theaters. In addition, all online information has been removed from the studio's website.

A teaser trailer from Columbia's upcoming *SPIDER-MAN*, which featured criminals being suspended in webbing between the two World Trade Center towers, has been pulled from theaters, and the original movie posters have also been recalled as the WTC towers were supposedly visible in reflection from the mask's eye pieces. The movie itself should not need to be altered or delayed from its May 2002 release, though, as the WTC did not otherwise feature in the film.

The finale of Sony's *MEN IN BLACK 2* also featured the WTC, and the ending is now being re-shot. The film is still expected to be released on July 2nd, 2002.

Other changes/delays include DreamWorks pulling the promo poster for its prison drama *THE LAST CASTLE*, which featured an American flag flying upside down, and Touchstone Pictures postponing the September 21 premiere of the comedy *BIG TROUBLE* starring Tim Allen, as it dealt with a terrorist bomb.

TELEVISION

In addition to removing any films containing a hint of an explosion or terrorist reference, the major networks also delayed most of their premieres so as not to compete with the round the clock news coverage during the week of the attacks. Several shows this season feature CIA agents and espionage/terrorist themes, so they are also coming under close scrutiny from network executives.

Friday September 21 saw an unprecedented event in the US with over 30 networks devoting their prime time to airing a 2 hour telethon for victims of the attacks.

Also shown in 210 countries around the world, the special drew nearly 60 million US viewers alone. While a dollar figure has not yet been calculated, 100% of the proceeds will go towards helping the victims. Anyone still wishing to contribute can do so at http://www.tributetoheroes.org/

The premier of CBS's *THE AGENCY*, in which the CIA thwarts a terrorist attack, has been put on hold. The show should air soon, but it is unknown whether that particular episode will be shown.

Fox will pull upcoming promotional spots for its new series *24*, about CIA efforts to prevent a political assassination. The debut episode was to feature a sequence where a terrorist blows up an airplane, but reports indicate that the show will now air minus the offending scenes.

New DVD Releases for October

The Mummy Returns

Many of this past summer's "blockbusters" are now finding their way to DVD, and Universal's *Mummy* sequel sports commentary by director Stephen Sommers, behind the scenes footage, an in-depth look at the SFX, outtakes, a music video, Egyptology info and a DVD-Rom look into the upcoming *The Scorpion King*. The Region 1 version ships October 2nd, but Region 2 fans will get theirs in December.

The Godfather Collection

Mooks and goombahs unite! Included on this 5-disc set is the complete trilogy of films along with commentary by Coppola, deleted scenes, rehearsal footage, a making-of featurette, production stills, storyboards and more. Fans of *The Sopranos* owe it to themselves to check out the original. Look for the R1 set in the US on October 9th, and the R2 version in the UK on October 8th.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarves

Whether Walt Disney was a secular saint or a fascist "name-namer" during the Communist witch hunts of the '50s may be open to debate –what *isn't* is the fact that *Snow White*, his company's first feature film, set the standard for American animation for the entire 20th century. This 2-disc set is literally *packed* with extra features, including a cobbled together audio commentary by Walt himself, animated menus, karaoke, mini-games, a *Silly*

A 5-part *LAW AND ORDER* miniseries dealing with a terrorist attack on the US, set to air in early 2002, is under close scrutiny at the moment.

VIDEOGAMES

Videogames, by their very nature, focus on black and white, good guy vs. bad guy conflicts with lots of explosions and action. Naturally, many of these plots involve terrorist themes and New York City as well. Some new games undergoing major changes/ updates include:

Activision's **SPIDER-MAN 2: ENTER ELECTRO** for the Playstation was set to be released

on September 18, but due to a final level which takes place on a WTC-like twin tower structure, has been pushed back several months to allow for the scene's removal. Look for the game in time for the holidays.

The most anticipated PS2 game of 2001 has to be Konami's **METAL GEAR SOLID 2: SONS OF LIBERTY**. As those who have played the demo know, the opening scenes deal with a terrorist organization capturing a tanker in a New York City harbour. According to a Konami spokesman, the game *will* still ship in November, albeit with minor tweaking of scenes that reportedly took place in or around the WTC. "Because the main theme of this game is the pursuit of peace," says Konami, "the scenario will remain essentially as it is." Whew.

Take-Two Interactive & Rockstar Studios have announced delays for two of their highly anticipated upcoming PS2 games, **SMUGGLER'S RUN 2** and **GRAND THEFT AUTO 3**. Over half of **SR2**, developed by Leith, Scotland-based DMA, was to take place in Afghanistan and in light of recent events the location will be changed and the graphics re-worked to eliminate all references.

GTA3, a "gangster simulation" set in New York City, will also be changed slightly. Look for both games to still be released this fall.

Microsoft's upcoming **PC FLIGHT SIMULATOR 2002**, set to be released on October 18, will be changed to remove the WTC towers from the simulated New York City landscape. There's also been talk of removing the ability to fly commercial airliners in future editions of the game.

Ubi Soft Entertainment has delayed the release of **TOM CLANCY'S ROGUE SPEAR: BLACK THORN**, a game dealing with an international terrorist counter-strike force, indefinitely. The game was originally to be released on October 9.

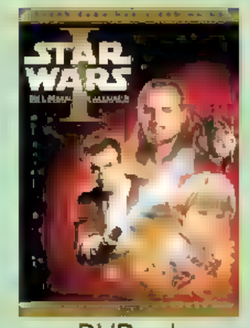
And that's just the tip of the iceberg. Aside from the obvious human cost involved in this attack, it seems fairly clear that the entertainment industry will feel the effects for a long time to come. As I said earlier, though, I sincerely hope that we don't simply try to ignore what's happened and sweep all references to it under the carpet. Is our entertainment "too violent", as many have claimed? Should movies or TV not be allowed to depict these sorts of acts in the future? Will we, as viewers, reject big budget, explosion filled movies from now on? I guess only time will tell.

BL

Symphony short, publicity material, documentaries, deleted scenes, a history of Disney through the decades, and much, much, *much* more. The list is practically endless! Look for the R2 UK version on October 1st, and the R1 version in stores October 9th.

Star Wars Episode One: The Phantom Menace

As someone who saw the original trilogy in the theater and lived/



breathed it during my childhood, I was completely disappointed in this lackluster prequel. Duty bound as I am to talk about the new DVD releases however, I'll just go on to say that this 2-disc set is packed with hours of extras, including audio commentary by Lucas and crew, deleted scenes, a brand new documentary, 5 featurettes, animatics, production photos and more. Unfortunately, there's still no option to digitally remove Jar Jar from the film. The R2 UK version will be in stores October 15th, and the R1 version on the 16th.

Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within

Many critics were blown away by the visuals in this spin-off from the popular Japanese videogame series while simultaneously being baffled by the mediocre eco-message plot. Now's *your* chance to decide as the film comes home on this deluxe 2-disc DVD. Included are production notes, trailers, 2 audio commentary tracks, an interactive making-of documentary, a music video, an alternate opening, DVD-Rom features, scene editing workshops and more. The R1 version hits stores on October 23, but as of yet no UK release date has been announced.

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WHAT IS MANGA?

Kevin Hill examines a couple of manga classics in the first of a two part look at the work of Kia Asamiya

Hawks and Angels

JUST for a moment forget about Katsuhiro Otomo. Forget about **Akira**. Forget Epic's colour reprints, or the spiffy new Dark Horse tomes. Put them out of your mind, and now start reading this column - all about Kia Asamiya.

Hawks

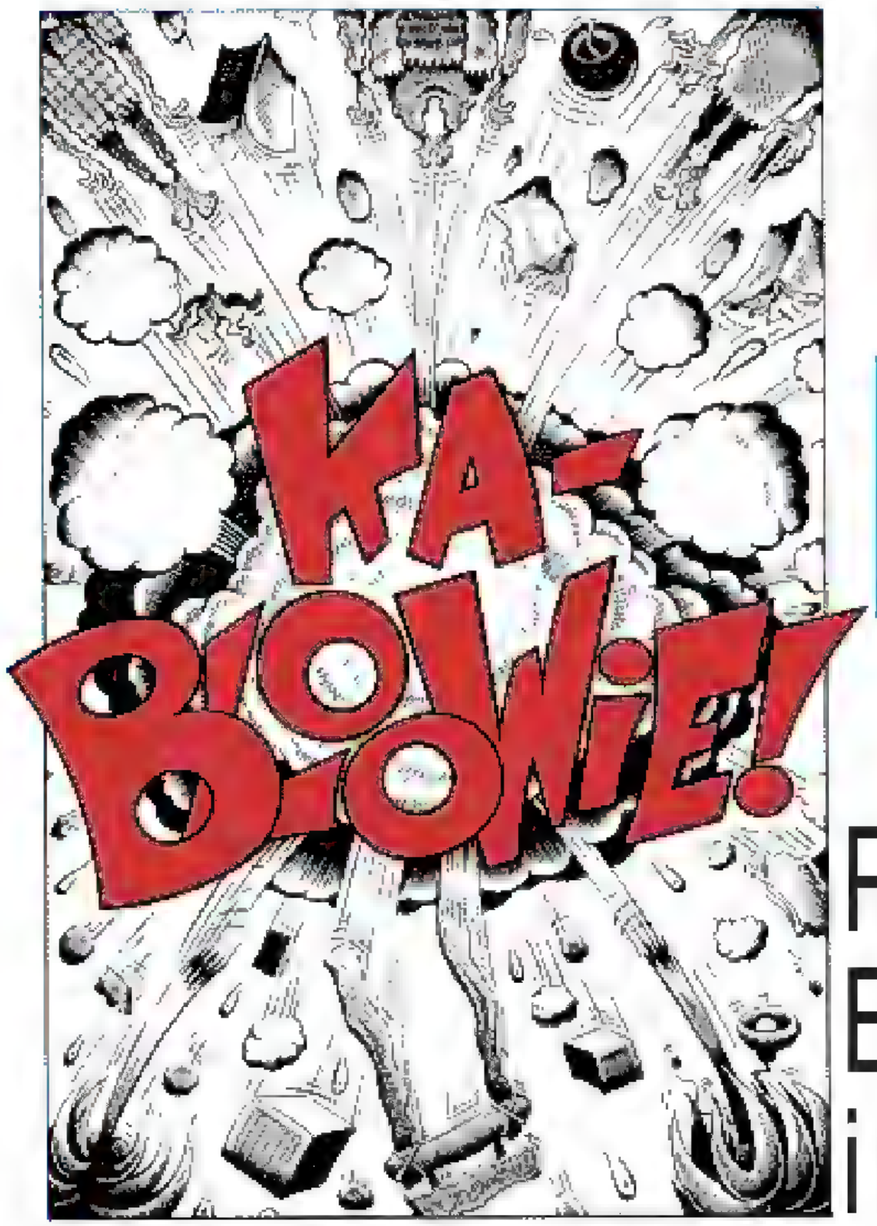
Asamiya first shot to fame in the English language comics market with his paranormal science-fiction series **Silent Möbius**, the story of a police force - known as the Abnormal Mystery Police, Attacked Mystification Police or AMP - fighting against the demonic Lucifer Hawks from the planet Nemesis. The largest of his translated works, currently on the fifth collected volume, this book was one of Viz Communications' earliest releases - also having the almost unique attribute of being in full colour on its initial release - with new story arcs currently being published on a semi-regular basis. Being one of the older of his works, **Silent Möbius** best illustrates the change in style that has occurred over the many years Asamiya has been producing comics. From the raw, almost caricatured style found in the earlier stories, to the more clinical style that is currently gracing the covers of **Teen Titans**, the effect is akin to the central characters maturing over the years. Set in a futuristic Japan, with stories taking place among Tokyo's maze-like streets and alleyways, towers, restaurants - even inside the computer network that connects the entire city together - and allowing for frenetically paced, sometimes highly destructive, occasionally comical battles between the AMP and the various intricately designed Lucifer Hawks, this work is Asamiya's greatest series. The story is dark and matched by artwork which relies heavily on grey tones, lending the future Tokyo a feel akin to that in *Blade Runner*. The primary characters, the AMP themselves, are an all-female force made up of a psychic, a cyborg, a priestess, a half-human half-demon and - most importantly - the sorcerer known as Katsumi Liquer. Katsumi is, quite literally, the key to the series, with much of the focus of the book being on her life, past and present, and her dealings with demons both real and personal. This focus on an all-female force and their relationships with others gives the story an air of soap opera, and while it does not quite contain the humour found in *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, the effect is somewhat similar; it is guaranteed to appeal to those who enjoy high action character-based stories.

Angels

Set in a fantasy world, the **Dark Angel** series tells the story of a reluctant hero, forced to take a journey to confirm his position as the Phantom Saint of the Red Phoenix, after slaying his mentor Sou-sama. This journey, and the useless sense of direction Dark - the hero in question - displays, cause various misunderstandings and confrontations but result in respect from most of those whom he and his trusted companion Kyo meet. Lighter in tone, but still with occasional dark moments, this is very much a sword and sorcery adventure story. Unlike **Silent Möbius**, **Dark Angel** is drawn in a style that features a more judicious use of shading tone, giving a less technical and more suitably organic look to the world Dark inhabits. Asamiya creates a fascinating world, full of spectacular views and people of

various shapes, forms and personalities. Dark himself is very much an enigma, a reluctant hero capable of defeating even the strongest of foes - although sometimes it appears that he is not battling through his own will, but instead the darker side of his personality comes to the fore and dispatches his enemies in a fittingly dark manner. Published on an (almost) monthly schedule by CPM Manga, several collections are currently available if the back issues are hard to find. This is definitely one for those who appreciate fantasy fiction, or those heavily into the worlds of role playing games.

Also available is **Dark Angel: Resurrection**, released by Fanboy Entertainment via Image Comics. It's an unusual piece of work, being a revisit to - or, rather, a remix of - the world of the original **Dark Angel** series, but with dramatically different characters. This time Dark is a brooding hero, much akin to Batman (more on that next time), who is named the new Phantom Saint by Sou-sama - rather than by victory in battle. The choice is not without contention. Again Dark must complete a journey to be officially named Phantom Saint, but this time his companion Kyo treats him with disdain, rather than with the happy, caring concern in the original. As with Fanboy's other Asamiya release, **Möbius Klein**, **Dark Angel: Resurrection** is drawn in Kia Asamiya's current style, but has the almost unique feature of being fully coloured.



IN THE BAGGE

Peter Bagge interviewed

Peter Bagge and Julie Doucet in 1997

*PETER Bagge's work represents a direct link between the American underground comics of the '70s and the US alternative comics scene of the present day. Born in New York State in 1957, Bagge studied art briefly during the late '70s before commencing work for the **East Village Eye**, **Screw**, **High Times**, and other more or less underground publications. One magazine which steadfastly rejected his submissions for years was Robert Crumb's seminal UG anthology **Weirdo** – but although Crumb rejected Bagge's work, he accepted him as replacement Editor of the magazine in 1984! The following year he commenced his first title for Fantagraphics, the magazine-sized **Neat Stuff** in which his loud-mouthed, vitriolic suburban "family from hell" The Bradleys debuted. In 1990 Bagge wound up **Neat Stuff** and focussed in on chronicling the slacker life and misadventures of the Bradleys' son Buddy in a new comicbook, **Hate**. Set in Seattle and associated with that city's vibrant pop scene in the early '90s, **Hate** became one of the alternative scene's greatest successes, holding the attention of a worldwide audience as it followed the painful, but hilarious progress of Buddy Bradley's maturation.*

*In 1998, seemingly at the height of its success, Bagge wound up Hate and began exploring new fields – online cartooning, magazine illustration, a **Spice Girls** special for Fantagraphics and a short-lived DC series, **Yeah!**, drawn by Gilbert Hernandez and spoofing girl bands. **Borderline**'s Matt Sommer asks Bagge about his current and future projects, the inside stories of **Hate** and **Yeah!**, and more.*

EARLY LIFE

Borderline:What was your childhood like? How autobiographical are those early Bradleys strips?

Peter Bagge: The Bradleys are pretty close to my family. We weren't *quite* as loud and bombastic, though. In fact we were a bunch of sensitive artistic types, and were considered a bunch of weirdos by our neighbors. Now that I think of it, we were a *lot* like the Crumb family as they were portrayed in that *Crumb* movie (only not quite as bad).

BL: What got you interested in comics? Were you reading them as a child? Were comic books around?

PB: Me and my siblings all read and loved Mad growing up. I especially loved it. We also read an occasional Archie or Harvey comic. None of us cared for superhero comics much.

BL: In Hate #26 you printed a strip by your late brother Doug... what part did he play in influencing you to be an artist? Was he the "Charles" to your "Crumb"?

PB: Doug was very much the "Charles" to my "Robert." The parallels are uncanny. Doug also died while living alone in my mother's basement! He drew quite a bit when we were younger, and had a real knack for doing funny comics. I started to draw comics mainly to be like him and keep up with him. He was a natural, and I had to work twice as hard to be half as good. He lost interest as he got older, though, and from the age of 25 or so stopped drawing altogether.

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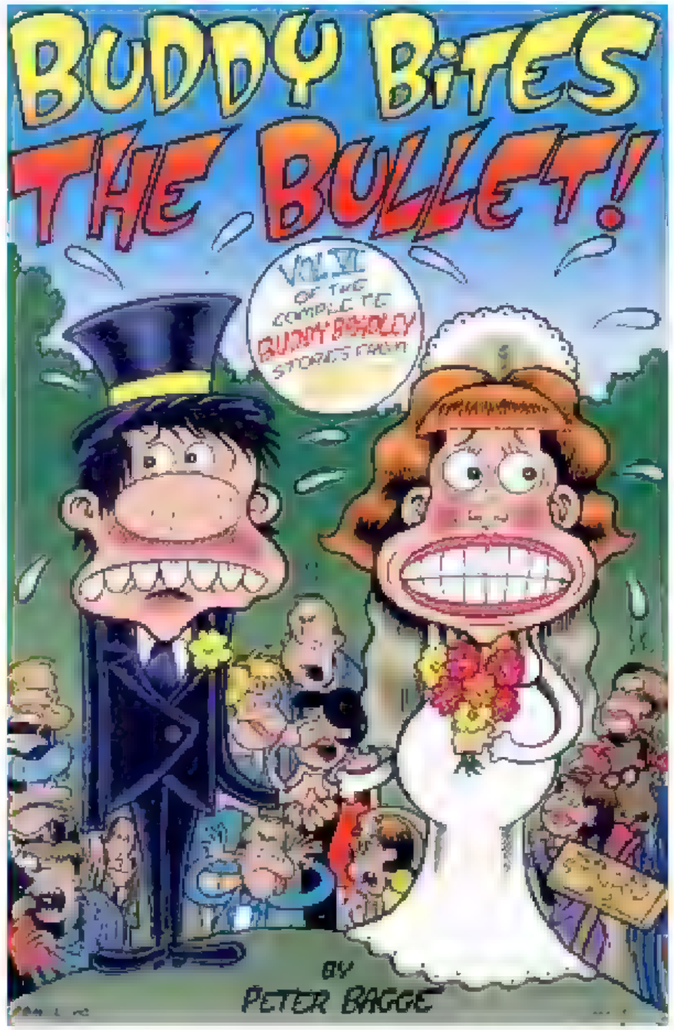

outcast and thus less alienated, I never had quite the love/hate relationship with myself that most alternative cartoonists seem to have; thus, my self-worth isn't quite as wrapped up in my work. I also seem to get along with non-cartoonists better. I don't think of everyone else as "stupid and clueless" the way so many artists do. I sorta *am* a more "regular person" in comparison to most of my peers!

BL: Your art style is definitely unique... where did it come from?

PB: Warner Bros. cartoons, Mad artists like Al Jaffee and Don Martin, Harvey Kurtzman, Big Daddy Roth and Basil Wolverton were all big artistic influences. Crumb and Charles M. Shultz were big influences story-wise *and* artistically as well.

BL: What role did drawing play in your socialization? Elsewhere you've said that you were never the introspective "social misfit" artist in high school, unlike many other "indy" cartoonists... do you think that difference (i.e., not basing your self worth on the "ar-teest" identity) played any part in how you view yourself and your work now?

PB: I was a shy kid, but I always had a lot of friends and even went on "dates." So yeah, I was different from most of my peers that way. How has that affected me now, you ask? Hmmm. Well, being less of an

BL: Your sense of humor and your take on comedy also seem to set you apart from most "indy" cartoonists these days... What influenced your storytelling style, sense of pacing, etc.? It seems much more based on a sitcom model than anything else (and I mean that in a good way).

PB: As I got into writing longer stories they did take on a very sitcom like style and format, though that was never intentional. It just evolved that way. There are big differences too, though. What I was doing in Hate was very character and dialog driven, and thus was less jokey and "laff-a-line" than sitcoms are. I rambled more!

THE DEATH (AND REBIRTH?) OF HATE

BL: Sort of like the end of Seinfeld, *Hate seemed to go out when it was still on the top of its game... was the decision to end the book a sudden one? The last few issues seemed to be building the book in a new direction (Buddy growing up, the death of Pops/Stinky, more anthology stuff). Was there a final straw moment or was the decision much more gradual? What happened? Were you just sick of it all?*

PB: I considered ending Hate at # 30 for a while, and as that issue loomed closer it just seemed like the natural thing to do. I was getting opportunities to try my hand at other things, and I wanted to take advantage of that. Plus I never wanted to *only* do Hate and Buddy Bradley for the rest of my life.

BL: Hate, in my mind, seemed like a book that would appeal to a huge mainstream audience, but was sort of trapped by its medium. I'd show issues to anyone I could find, yet while they enjoyed them, they'd never take that extra effort to actually find a comic shop and buy them. Does it ever frustrate you that your work never found that wider audience? That the Hollywood stuff never happened?

PB: The inaccessibility of alternative comics has always been a source of frustration for me. I did my best to fight it, but what can you do? Hollywood is also very frustrating, since the stakes are so high and the odds are so stacked against you. But I'm still trying though, fool that I am.

BL: Was it easy/hard/weird/ comforting to return to a Buddy story in this year's Hate Annual? All I can say is that it was too short! [laughs].

PB: I wasn't sure if I should do Buddy again, or if I should even do Hate again! But I wound up doing both just to keep both alive somehow, even if it's simply a case of keeping them on life support... I'm keeping the stories short and the issues slow simply because I can't afford the time to devote all my energies towards Buddy like I used to. I just want to do an occasional Buddy tale at a leisurely pace...

BL: In addition, your wife has been the colorist on your last several projects... how did that come about?

PB: My wife took over the coloring

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around the time our daughter entered school, and thus could afford the time to work on it. She's the best for me because she knows exactly what I want with the coloring.

BL: In that 1998 The Comics Journal *interview, you mentioned you wanted to return to Hate or some other title as an anthology along the lines of Weirdo... as of 2001 that hasn't really happened. Are you still interested in this, or are you sort of over it? Los Bros Hernandez recently went back to calling their comic Love and Rockets after a few years of solo projects that didn't seem to sell as well. Do you worry that you may never get past Hate?*

PB: I used to worry about that. Now I don't care. Like the Bros, once I stopped doing my main title I realized that having a familiar "hit" title under your belt is better than nothing. It's not worth getting all resentful about.

BL: Will we be seeing yearly Hate annuals at this point? Or is it still up in the air?

PB: Yes, one a year is my plan.

LIFE AFTER HATE

BL: You seem to have reinvented yourself in the last three years as something of a journalist cartoonist. Was the Details *piece on the Aspen Comedy Festival your first foray into this area?*

PB: Yes.

BL: How'd that come to pass?

PB: Art Spiegelman asked me to do it. Those *Details* features were all his idea.

BL: You've also become something of an online maverick - in fact, the bulk of your work over the last few years has been online. Do you feel that way lies the future of the medium (a la Scott McCloud)? Or were those just the companies that were ponying up the big IPO dough? [laughter]

PB: The latter! And unfortunately that IPO money is no more, so you won't be seeing my work online anytime soon other than on Adobe.com (which will re-launch the cartoon/comic I did for them in September) and *Reason*, once they put the comics I'm doing for them on their site like they're supposed to. There is a lot of obvious potential for comics online, but I don't think that it's *the* future.

BL: Of your online works, the majority were various reportage pieces (infomercials, Indy, *the 2000 presidential election stuff, etc.) for Suck.com... how did you become involved with them? Do you enjoy this sort of non fiction cartooning, or would you rather be doing something more "creative"?*

PB: The Suck stuff was all the idea of Suck's founder, Joey Anuff. I enjoyed some of the cultural event stuff, like Miss America, but I didn't enjoy the political stuff. It was depressing to work on, and the responses I'd get from them were ridiculously knee-jerk and partisan.

BL: What piece of online work are you yourself the most proud of?

PB: The Rock 'n' Roll Dad cartoons I did for Icebox.com with Dana Gould. Dana's the funniest guy I ever collaborated with, and Icebox did a great job on those, production wise.

BL: At this point, online comics still seem to be too slow and too unnatural... what are your thoughts on the plusses/minuses of the form? I know you've always wanted to see Hate in animated form.

PB: I agree that online comics and/or animation needs to load faster, and it will and is. How it will be best presented and used is something that will evolve over time. I think sites will use them the way newspapers used comic strips, only they'll be like animated comic strips. That's how I see them working best, anyway...

BL: Were you happy with the semi-animated Leeway strips from Adobe.com? Do you see yourself doing anything else with Flash animation in the future?

PB: The animated intro to the Leeways could run faster. They're trying to correct it, only the problem is that they have to use "Live Motion," which is their answer to Flash, and LM still is new and thus full of the usual kinks.

BL: With the downturn in the internet market in the last year or so, has the well dried up, so to speak, as far as work goes? Are you working on anything else for any of these sites at the moment?

PB: I got more offers for print work, ironically. So I'm still managing to pay the bills for now.

LIFE WITH GARY

BL: Almost all of your comic work over the years has been published through Fantagraphics. What is/has been your relationship with Gary Groth? Not looking for any dirt here, just curious... In my mind, you're one of the most "mainstream" cartoonists I know of, in that you seem to want to entertain the reader above all, rather than make some kind of artistic statement... you've openly stated that you'd like to make a living

(gasp!) and that you'd love to have your own animated Hate TV show. All this stuff seems perfectly reasonable yet seems to run counter to everything that The Comics Journal *and Gary Groth have stood for. How have you managed to reconcile these two disparate points of view?*

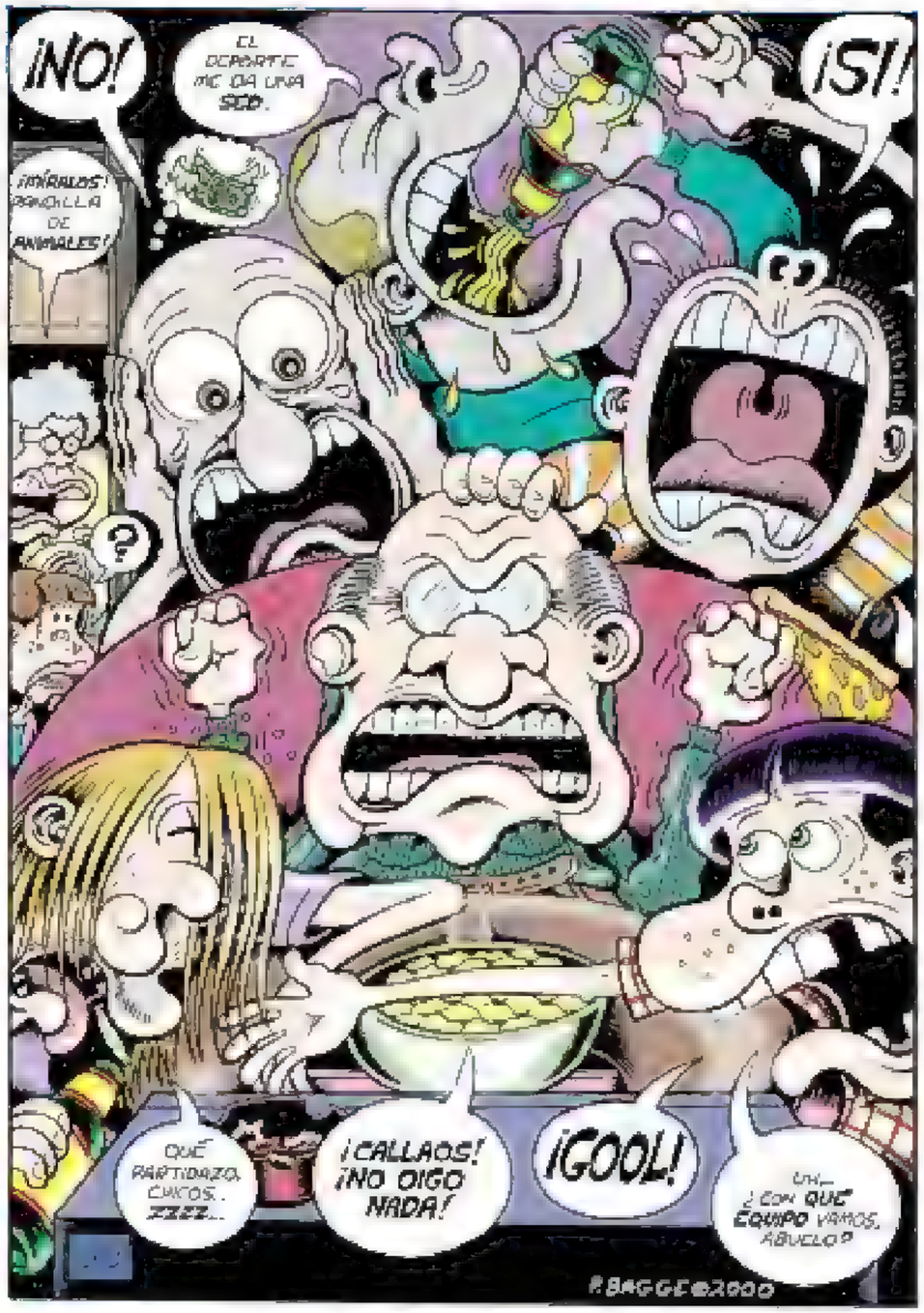
PB: Gary and Kim Thompson and Fantagraphics have been great for me since they offered me the chance to do my own comic in which I could do pretty much whatever I want. At the time that was a rare opportunity, and I was determined to make the most of it (which I did), so I'm extremely grateful to them for that. Gary and I have different views regarding politics and commerce and how the latter may or may not contribute to the creation of good art etc. etc. etc., but our differences never were personal. We just agreed to disagree like the mature gentlemen that we are.

BL: Have you ever thought about self-publishing, or is that too much of a hassle? What is it about Fantagraphics that has kept you there all these years?

PB: I occasionally consider self-publishing, and then give up on the idea a minute later. Too much hassle... I'd also jump to a different publisher in a heartbeat if one offered to provide a better "home" for me and my work, but so far that hasn't happened.

GIRL POWER

BL: You and I originally met, I'm almost too embarrassed to say,



because of a mutual infatuation with the Spice Girls... dirty old men both [laughter]... Part of why I asked the above question is to find out how in the hell you ever convinced Gary Groth to publish Spice Capades!! How'd that book come about? How well did it sell? What was the response from your fans?

PB: Gary agreed to publish it once he saw the impressive list of contributors that editor Queen Itchie came up with for it. I think it sold reasonably well, though it may have sold more if it came out sooner and capitalized on the SG mania that it sorta just missed out on by 6 months or a year or so... No one gave me a hard time about it as I recall. The whole idea of the title offended some, but once they saw it they all sorta went "oh." I mean, in the end it was just another underground comic, basically.

BL: This might be a good time to segue into talking about Yeah!. Where did the idea come from? I can sort of guess... your love of female pop groups, coupled with Beto's Archie/Josie and the Pussycats influences...

PB: Yes. And wanting to do something that would entertain my daughter, as well as something that was radically different from Hate.

BL: But how'd the two of you get together on this? What motivated you to go from "mature readers only" to "all ages"? Where'd the characters come from?

PB: I asked Gilbert to draw it. He was basically just a hired hand at first, and only agreed to do three issues. But as time went on he stayed with it. For him it was just the money that made him agree, though he seemed to get into doing it to some degree or he wouldn't have stuck with it... The characters are a combination of the Pussycats, the Spice Girls and some real life friends of mine (Queen Itchie and Dame Darcy in particular).

BL: How did you end up at DC/ Homage with this book? What was it like, working for such a traditionally corporate environment? Were you given free rein, or were you "interfered with"?

PB: An editor from DC, Shelly Roeberg (now Shelly Bond) called and asked me to come up with a title for them, which eventually evolved into Yeah!. I knew going in that I wouldn't have as much creative freedom with them as I did with Fantagraphics, but I was given a lot of latitude, all things considered. What I didn't like about them was things like the random ad placement which would often interfere with the story, as well as "rules" like forcing us to use a letterer, rather than letting me or Gilbert H. letter it ourselves. But aside from such arbitrary corporate stubborness, I liked working for them okay.

BL: Do you feel the book died a premature death? I think I might have been one of your few "fans" who actually bought all 9 issues [laughter]... Do you think DC did enough to reach the younger audience? Were you happy with the book?

PB: I couldn't blame DC for cancelling it, since sales were abysmal and getting worse with each issue. We were all guilty of trying to reach an audience that simply didn't exist; that being young girls who go into comic shops. The one big disappointment though, was that me and Gilbert's old Hate and L&R readers didn't like it either. I thought more of them would have. I was happy with the book. It was a lot of fun to work on. I'm very proud of it for the most part.

BL: Despite the seemingly total lack of interest, there have been a few attempts lately by artists to once

again reach the kids' comics market - you and Beto with Yeah!, and Beto's own Measles anthology title among others. I grew up reading Archies, Harveys and Disneys, then *went on to Marvel and DC... is the kids' comic market in the US completely dead? Is the medium in danger of dying out as the current generations of readers age without being replaced?*

PB: There's too much competition from electronic media, which is way more razzle dazzle and appealing to kids than comics are. Of course kids still read books, but book reading is actively encouraged by parents, schools and libraries, who buy books *for* kids. Comics don't get that kind of support at all. It's considered pop culture flotsam and jetsam like video games are, only kids like video games better because they're snazzier.

BL: Do you feel like you've alienated your core audience, the fanbase that you earned with Hate, by working on such projects as Spice Capades and Yeah!? Do you care at this point? As much as I miss Buddy and co., I will say that I at least respect you for doing new things and not allowing yourself to get stuck in the same rut (as, say, someone like Joe Matt has).

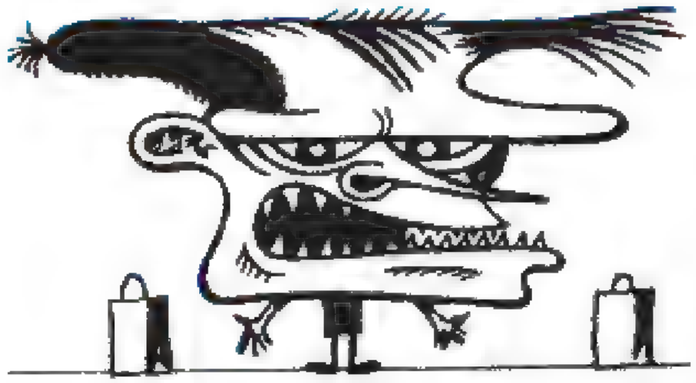
PB: I may have lost a few fans with the stuff you mentioned. I don't know. I hope not, but if so then so be it. I don't mind someone like Joe Matt being in a rut as long as he continues to do good work (which he does). But I do get bored easily and like to try new things. Ya take yer chances, what can I say?

POLITICS

BL: Most recently, you've been contributing a monthly strip to Reason Magazine, *a libertarian journal. How'd this come about?*

PB: Again, the editor of *Reason* simply asked me to contribute. I always liked the magazine, the pay is good and I like the editors, so of course I said yes.

BL: Are you a member of the Libertarian party? What aspects of the philosophy do you support? In earlier



issues of Hate, you seemed to be sort of making fun of the party by having Steve the collector slob wearing a button... was this a change of heart or have you been subversively converting us all along? [laughs]

PB: I'm not a formal member of the Libertarian Party, though I always vote for them because I agree with them more than the other party candidates. I'm not an idealog in that I'm not in favor of ending Social Security or public schools, but I do think the libertarian philosophy is one we ought to try to work more towards, rather than fleeing from responsibility and becoming wards of the State the way we all are... I laugh at other libertarians for the same reasons I make fun of comic book people in general, since both tend to mainly consist of dishevelled know-it-all white guys. I think it's hilarious that a lot of people think libertarians are a bunch of rich people who are trying to keep all their money, since that is very far from the truth. Rich people hold on to their wealth, power and position by contributing to the two major parties in the form of influence peddling. Libertarians just want to live as freely as they possibly can.

MISCELLANEOUS

BL: Many of the alternative cartoonists who dominated the 80s and 90s are now into their forties. In your opinion, are there any new, *younger creators stepping up to lead the way these days? Any faves you want to hype here?*

PB: I love Johnny Ryan's Angry Youth Comics. He's as funny as they come! And Dave Cooper is doing great work in his new Weasel title. I also like [Adrian Tomine's] Optic Nerve a lot, even if it isn't new. But he is young! Witch by Lorna Miller (Slab-O-Concrete/Slave Labor) is also a good one. I wrote a two pager in the debut issue! She's a good artist who keeps getting better.

BL: I sort of asked this before, but do you think the comic industry is doomed?

PB: I've often thought comics were doomed over the last 25 years, and yet here we are. They'll always exist on some level, I suppose.

BL: Have you seen the movie version of Ghost World *yet? Now that Clowes and Zwigoff have released this movie to near universal critical acclaim, are you a bitter old crank? [laughter]*

PB: I loved *Ghost World*. I thought it was great! I assume all this acclaim will be good for Terry and Dan. Whether it will trickle down to losers like me, who knows?

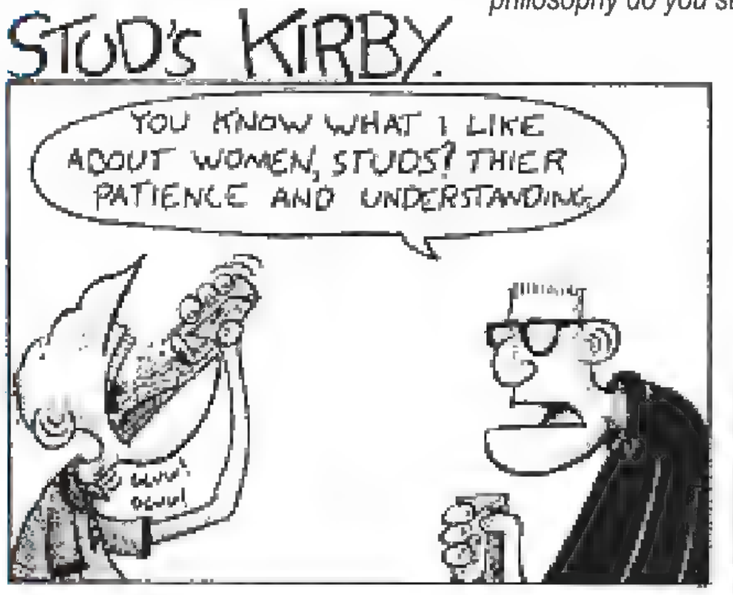
BL: Seriously, does their success inspire you to try again with Hollywood? I imagine this might set off a flurry of other "alternative comics" movies... Any other progress on the Yeah! deal?

PB: I won't say no to a movie deal if offered one, but I'm not real interested in making a movie. I still want to do a TV show. I have a development deal for Yeah! that has been on hold forever. Other than that nothing is happening with Hate or anything else. I'm yesterday's news; a "'90s guy." Sob!

BL: What are you now working on?

PB: A new issue of Hate Annual, which will include a Lovey story that is currently being serialized in *Tokion Magazine*. I also hope to start work on a Yeah! pilot script one of these days...

And the weirdest news of all is that I'm going to do a one-shot Spider-Man story for Marvel! I'll be writing and drawing it. So look out, comics fans! BL



A WORD WITH DA ORDSTER

IF YOU haven't heard of Jerry Ordway, give me the address of the rock you live under and I'll move under it to escape the taxman. Jerry started his career by inking a Carmine Infantino sci-fi story for a relaunched Mystery in Space in 1980. Since then he's worked with the best creators in the US industry on a stunning array of titles, although he's probably most renowned for his work on the book that redefined the DC Universe. Since then he's worked with the best creators in the US industry on a stunning array of titles, although he's probably most renowned for his work on Crisis on Infinite Earths, the book that redefined the DC Universe. Jerry's assisted in the death of Superman, he's shown us the Power of Shazam, and he's held the Marvel Universe under Maximum Security with the USAgent! Borderline's Danny Black *decided it was time to learn more about the man they call Da Ordster.*

BORDERLINE: Hi Jerry. Let's start at the beginning - what got you involved in comics?

JERRY ORDWAY: I suppose my interest in superheroes was sparked by the TV broadcast of *The Marvel Superheroes* cartoon show, back in 1966 or so. They were crude cartoons, seemingly taken right from the pages of the comics. Very rough, but powerfully visual. Then, of course, I was turned on to Batmania by the live action *Batman* TV show. I was the right age to love that show - around 9 years old, so all the Bat gadgets just set my imagination afire! When I actually bought the comics, I started copying the drawings, and eventually began to draw my own adventures and my own characters, which led to my current career, many eons later!

BL: Are you happiest writing or drawing? Do you find one easier than the other?

JO: I like all kinds of combinations, really. Obviously on my own characters, like The Messenger, from Image last Summer, I wanted to do it all. On company characters, it's fun to collaborate. Writing is easier, physically, than drawing. It requires a different discipline than drawing, though is more stressful on a mental level for me. When I was writing "Power of Shazam" for DC, with Peter Krause pencilling, I was able to maintain normal hours, not having to work 16 hours a day, like when pencilling and writing a monthly title.

BL: Do you draw on any influences from outside the comics field?

JO: I read a lot, and enjoy watching documentaries and such on TV. For drawing, I've always maintained a clipping file - photos cut from

various magazines, filed by subject. It comes in handy when you're called upon to draw a certain locale, or vehicle or something.

BL: What factors determine whether you work on a specific title or character? Is there a title or character that you haven't worked on and would like to?

JO: They usually have but to ask, and if I find that the editor is good to work with, and I have any ideas what I could bring to the character, I'm game! As a kid, I never thought I'd make my mark on characters like Superman and Captain Marvel (Shazam!), as I was a huge fan of the Marvel mainstays, like Daredevil, and Spider-Man. Well, the opportunities I got led me down that path. I worked mostly for DC for many, many years because I felt a bond of loyalty to them, and mainly fended off offers from Marvel. That changed a few years back, and I finally got to draw some of my childhood faves.

BL: What current creators get you excited? Are there many books that you rush out to buy?

JO: I like Kurt Busiek's work, and Erik Larsen, and Carlos Pacheco, and Alan Davis, and - the list goes on and on. I am a fan of comics, period! I always find someone whose talent I envy, which inspires me to work harder.

BL: There's a story that when you were a jobbing freelancer, you once worked on a fanzine with a number of other now known creators, including Steve Lightle and Rafael Kayanan - what was that and can you tell us more about it?

JO: I'm not sure what this refers to, but there are two possibilities. One is my inking work on Steve Lightle's fanzine *Cobalt Blue* back in the 1970s before either of us turned pro. The other is my agreeing to ink Steve in the early 1980s, so that Bill Black, of Americomics fame, would give him work. I believe Rafael did work for Americomics, as well as Erik Larsen, Mike Machlan, Rik Levins, and Mark Heike. Bill Black was the first guy to pay a lot of us for our work, easing our transitions into pro-dom. I did a lot of fan work from 1974 until 1980, when I started getting assignments from DC Comics. It was great fun.

BL: Your list of credits would take Borderline to over 10megs! If you had to pick your best work, what would it be?

JO: That's the advantage to working full time in comics for over 20 years! I look back, and am amazed at the steady output I've managed. I started on All Star Squadron, then drew Infinity Inc., both spin-offs from the popular 1940s era Justice Society. I inked 8 issues of Byrne's Fantastic Four, 8 of the Crisis, over Perez; then pencilled a few Fantastic Fours before settling in on Superman for many years. My best work is spread throughout, but my favorite work is my Power of Shazam graphic novel, my Batman movie adaptation, and The Messenger, still available from Image comics. Please order one - I'm still in the red ink with Image on that!

BL: The editor is a fan of your Superman run - how did it feel to be dropped in the deep end with that, going from penciller to writer/artist?

JO: I wouldn't have been as prepared had it happened a year earlier, but I was actively co-plotting and getting paid for it when John Byrne was scripting Adventures of Superman, and his generosity allowed me to feel I had something good to contribute. As a matter of fact, Mike Carlin assigned me the Adventures Annual to write, which ultimately wound up as an issue of Adventures, with John Statema drawing. *That* was my trial by fire, and Carlin beat that script into submission, let me tell you. His quote to me was,"Why does every artist turned writer have to write so much copy?". I took his critique to heart, and followed his advice, and by my artist/writer debut with the Brainiac/Jimmy Olsen story, I was on my way! The real worry was that Byrne's loyal fans would abandon the book in droves, but that didn't happen to a great degree. For the first year we based our success on reaction from readers, not sales, which was very trusting and generous of DC as a company. We were allowed to find our rhythm, and build our fan base back up. That doesn't happen much

anymore. Carlin's my hero for all he did to make me a writer!

BL: How do you feel about Joey Q's gauntlet-throwing statement about artists - has it spurred you on or does it make you feel as though Marvel is moving away from traditional artists, therefore you're looking for different outlets?

JO: Oh, absolutely, the Quesada statement about "Darwinism" has me exploring DC Comics again for assignments. When Joe took over, he seemed to make it clear that DC's Vertigo was the business model he wanted to emulate, so I already expected my options to be limited somewhat. *[Marvel editor]* Tom Brevoort has been an advocate for me, and I've done the bulk of my workload for him these past three years, though no regular pencilling or writing assignments have come from it. I know he likes my work, but I don't have any sense of my future there at Marvel. I love the characters a lot, and hope to get the chance to continue on them, but I feel like I'm yesterday's flavour to them in some ways.

BL: Tell us how you feel about comics as a medium at the moment, how optimistic are you about the artform?

JO: Well, I think comics will continue in some way. They are so easy to produce - I did one when I was in High School! Seriously, the technology is easy, though I suspect the Internet will find a way to reinvent them, and may already have. If you have the skills, or even the inspiration, you can tell a story in words and pictures. How primal is that? So, whether comics will survive as big business or not, I don't know, but they will continue to be made and read.

BL: You've got a fantastic webpage (http://shazam.imginc.com/jerryordway/) *and your own Yahoogroup, how do you see the relationship between new technology and the comics industry?*

JO: Well, I use my page as more of a preview of my past and current work, but I can see a time when I do more story content to draw regular viewers. I think this is currently the best and cheapest route to publishing, or at least getting your work seen, as print orders for creator owned books are generally not financially feasible these days (at least for me). I'd like to see some sort of pay-as-you-go format, or perhaps print on demand comics, which I understand Bill Black's Paragon Publications has been doing lately. Look, when I do something, I am working for an audience, not a collector, so I want it seen and read by the biggest audience available. That's what comics are – they're not posters, or prints. They are stories, and the Internet will be a great delivery service for them.

BL: Jerry, what can you tell us about Just Imagine...Stan Lee with Jerry Ordway Creating JLA? How did you get involved and what can the fans expect from it?

JO: Editor Mike Carlin asked me, simple as that. I was flattered, and am currently drawing the Justice League installment. The villains of the piece are the Doom Patrol, a ragtag group of hardened criminals snatched from death row, and given amazing powers! Reverend Darrk, from previous Just Imagine... books will of course play a crucial part, but there are plenty of twists and turns along the way.

BL: Having been involved in various DC Crises and Zero Hours, have you ever wanted to do your own revamp of an existing universe or character? And if so, which ones?

JO: Most of the characters that appeal to me don't seem broken, so I could ease into any one of them without upsetting the apple cart, so to speak, rather than a major revamp. I would like the time to try my hand at Captain America, though, or even Spider-Man, but like I said earlier... Anyhow, I really would like the opportunity to develop some new properties, and may pitch something to DC soon.

BL: Dredd and USAgent - we won't cover the legal aspect, but what is your take on the situation?

JO: I will defend what we did, and I certainly didn't go out of my way to do a Dredd rip-off. I thought the USAgent character was played consistently with his earlier, Mark Gruenwald scripted tales, and the costume was more "Gangbuster" than anything else. My point of reference was an article in *Popular Science* that showed a high-tech police riot outfit, and I went from there. While I had him in a more traditional policeman's helmet, Brevoort suggested the longer visor, to make it harder to see his face. I think the big problem here was the Marvel copywriter who wrote the ad copy for the Diamond catalog, though I have no way of knowing if it was an intentional homage to Dredd or not. I hate that it might have wound up putting people off the miniseries altogether. I hope your readers will give it a chance, and hopefully enjoy a character driven story about a dysfunctional superhero with a chip on his shoulder the size of Captain America!

BL: Most importantly what can we expect from Jerry Ordway in the immediate future?

JO: I have no other assignments booked at this point. I am also inking the JLA book so, at 48 pages, I want to avoid any overlapping assignments. I'm just cautious that way. I hope to pitch some more creator projects, through DC possibly, as they will cover page rates. Image is a great set-up to do your own thing in, but as with The Messenger, I received no money for writing and drawing it, and it didn't make any profit, so obviously I can't feed my family with projects like that. Those are labors of love, and food and shelter take precedence.

Assault on Manhattan

Benefit books are announced after World Trade Centre tragedy

IT was a day to remember - for all the wrong reasons.

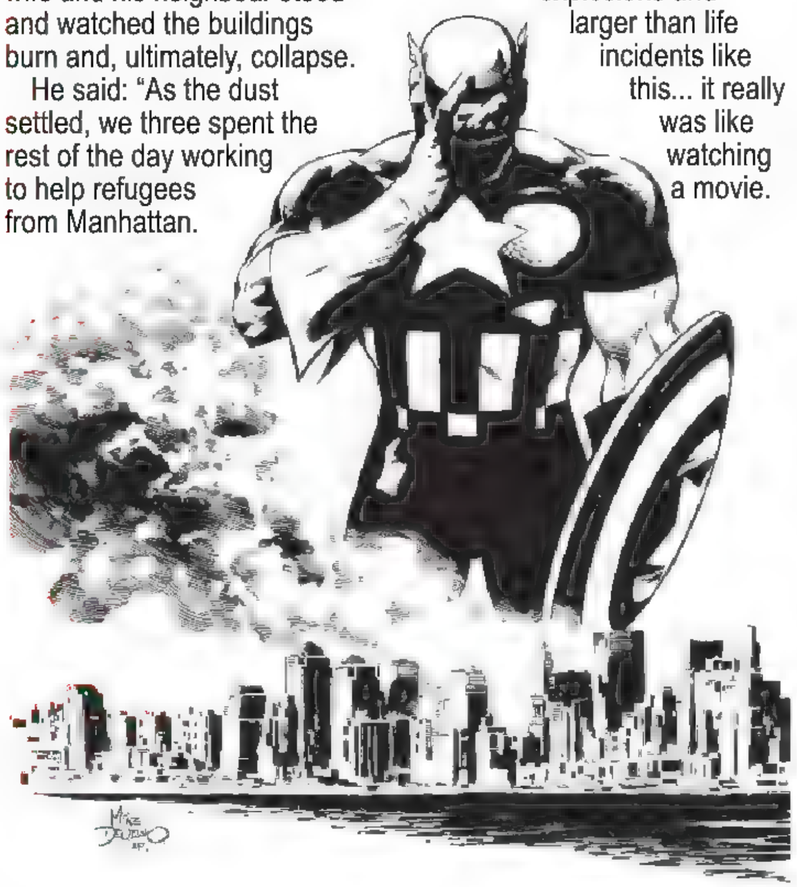
Certainly this writer will never forget turning on the TV, intending to watch *X-Men* on DVD - and watching a passenger airliner hurtle into the World Trade Centre instead. The sense of shock and horror stayed with me all day. But I wasn't there.

A horde of comics professionals were. Andrew Lis, an assistant editor at Marvel, was late for work that day. Andrew's neighbour has a veranda on her third floor. With an unobstructed view, he, his wife and his neighbour stood and watched the buildings burn and, ultimately, collapse.

He said: "As the dust settled, we three spent the rest of the day working to help refugees from Manhattan. We did what we could, though I barely feel comfortable talking about the rest of the day because attempts to talk about anything but 5,000 dead innocents feel sensational and false."

Mike Carlin, an editor at DC Comics, was also on his way into Manhattan. His sister had started work in a building attached to the World Trade Centre just a week earlier.

He told Borderline: "As we watched, the second airliner swooped in and hit the second tower. Without sounding like I've been desensitized to seeing explosions and larger than life incidents like this... it really was like watching a movie.



In fact, the train's window provided a widescreen effect for the biggest Die Hard explosion I ever hope to see.

"After an hour or two of worrying - I'm an expert - my Mom called and said that my sister immediately left her job after the first plane hit and started walking back home to Brooklyn over the Brooklyn Bridge. So she was getting to safety while cellphone service was unable to locate her. Whew!"

Dean Haspiel, cartoonist on Opposable Thumbs and Billy Dogma, said: "What I witnessed from my Brooklyn windows and roof, and the flaming documents that came casually floating through my window from the collapsing offices of the World Trade Centre across the river, and the ash of debris and smoke that snowed on my neighborhood, covering it with human detritus and soot, is the most devastating communal disaster experience of my life. Harrowing. I learned fear."

Bill Rosemann, Marvel's Marketing Communications Manager, said: "While we realize now is time to think about and pray for those that have perished, it is also time to show those evil forces that we will prevail - even if that means simply by going on and performing our daily jobs. So we will gear back up and do what we do best: create comic books that entertain readers of all ages.

"We must rebuild. We must return to our lives. We must utilize the freedom that others have - and continue to - die for."

Patty Jeres of DC Comics added: "Life is nowhere near back to normal - whatever normal is going to be."

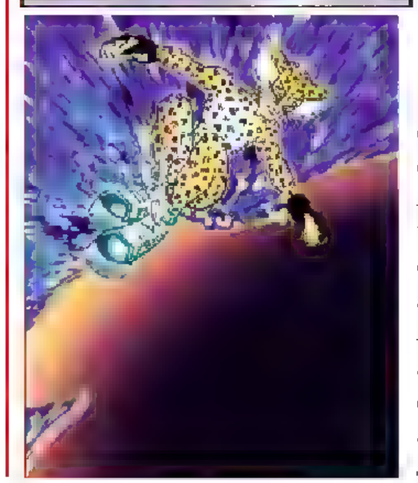
A plethora of comics publishers have announced special benefit books in aid of the Red Cross, firefighters and New York City policemen who acted - and in many cases died - so heroically on September 11.

Marvel is to release Heroes, a tribute book that will both honour and raise money for the families of those who died, while trying to help those caught in the tragedy.

Marie Croall, sales manager at Chaos! Comics, proposed that the whole comic industry put together a tribute book with the theme of New Year's Hope - to be released in January. All proceeds from the books would go to the survivors' families. Dark Horse Comics has joined forces with Chaos! Comics to create it, along with Image Comics, Oni Press and Top Shelf Comics.

Brazilian artist Mike Deodato, Jr has already released an image showing his feelings toward the tragedy.

But a note of caution has been raised. Logan Lubera posted to the SuperHero News e-mail group: "I wanted to say a few words on behalf of my wife and I - her uncle passed on September 11. If you are one of the people building a tribute book, please contact the others. Get together, make one giant tome or collection. Really make this project a force of interest and power. Art and storytelling have and will always be a source of healing and a way to bring us all even closer."



Sneak DK peak

WHILE Frank Miller continues to keep the majority of the forthcoming ***Dark Knight Strikes Back*** *under wraps, here is a sneak preview of page 27 of the 1st issue of the sequel to the massive* ***Dark Knight Returns*** *(Catwoman to the left). Note that Ray Palmer, aka The Atom, is featuring in this four-part prestige format series.*

Legendary EC creator dies

JOHNNY Craig, one of the stalwarts of EC Comics during the early 1950s and later an artist for Warren and Marvel, died during the second week of September. Details of the exact date, or cause, of his death are currently unavailable.

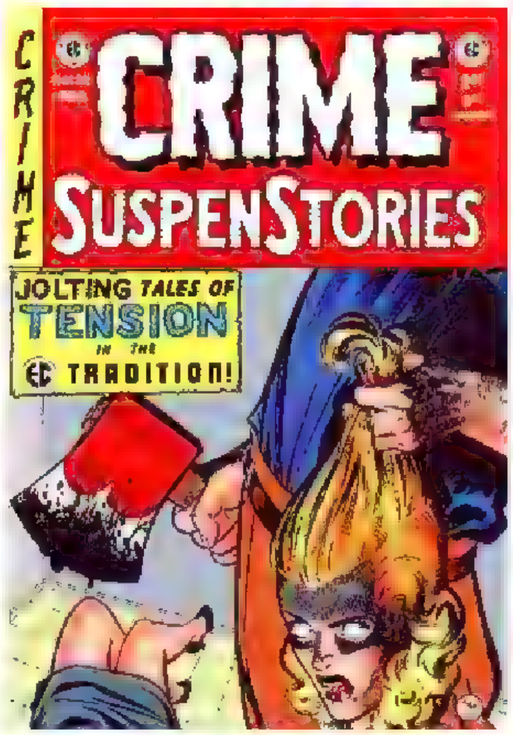
Born in New York in 1926, Craig may have had no formal art training when, at the age of 14, he heard of a comics artist seeking an assistant and applied for the job. His new employer was Harry Lampert, a DC staff artist who had drawn the first appearance of The Flash. Craig worked for him - and later for All American editor Sheldon Mayer - as a production assistant, drawing panel borders, spotting blacks, lettering and picking up tips on drawing.

Having spent three years in the services from 1943 to 1946, Craig applied for work with Educational Comics, a company run by former All American president M.C. Gaines, and was again taken on as a production assistant. In 1947 Gaines died in a boating accident: his son, William Gaines, took over the company, changed its name to Entertaining Comics (EC) and began to give Craig art assignments.

By 1950, when EC's now legendary line of horror, science fiction, war and crime comics had begun to take firm shape, Craig had become a central figure in the company's operations. Apart from production work he was drawing beautifully designed covers and interior stories; subsequently he designed the "Horror Host" The Crypt Keeper for **Tales From The Crypt**, and took on much of the scripting for **The Vault of Horror**.

However, Craig reached an unusual pinnacle of public notoriety in 1954 when his uncharacteristically gory cover for **Crime Suspenstories #22** became the subject of a televised exchange between Gaines and Senator Estes Kefauver, chairman of a Congressional enquiry into the comics. Subsequent pressure from distributors and from the publishers who banded together to establish the Comics Code Authority forced EC to abandon its horror line in 1955; a number of "New Direction" titles replaced it, and Craig was appointed editor of one of them, **Extra!**. Although it lasted for only five issues, Craig made the most of his belated chance to experiment with the medium, abandoning the standard EC stencil lettering and linking comics with illustrated prose in a hybrid form which he called "Picto-Fiction".

By 1956 EC had abandoned comicbook publishing; Craig, like many other EC horror artists, found himself unable to find work elsewhere and left the industry, working as an art director in an advertising agency. However, he returned to comics early in the 1960s, first freelancing pseudonymously for ACG and then producing black and white work for Warren's horror magazines.



In 1967 he attempted to find work at DC; his try-out issue, published considerably redrawn as **The Brave and The Bold #70**, was considered unsuitable. Craig then applied to Marvel and inked Gene Colan on the *Iron Man* strip in **Tales of Suspense**, prior to taking on the pencilling duties on the **Iron Man** title launched in 1968. Stan Lee, however, felt that his work lacked the necessary dynamism, and after a few issues he was replaced. Apart from a few pencilling assignments on Marvel and DC mystery titles, the rest of his work in comics was as an inker, on titles such as **Daredevil** and **The Sub-Mariner**.

By the late 1970s Craig had left the industry again, for good. The EC comics had become a cult, praised and collected by fans and academics alike, and for the remainder of his life he was able to support himself by producing recreations of EC originals, new visualisations featuring his "Horror Hosts" and original paintings.

Johnny Craig's comics output may have been limited by a painstaking slowness - Bill Gaines described him as the slowest of all EC artists - and his, cool, precise style was less spectacular than the kind of approach which the comics industry came to require. However, Craig was highly respected within the industry as an "artist's artist", a man of quiet, rare skill in all aspects of the production and creation of comicbooks.

As **Borderline** was going to production, we learned Craig's fellow EC creator, George Evans, also died in the last weeks of September.

Comics sales are on the rise

Sales of American comics are on the increase again

Figures worked out by Borderline staff suggest that sales to comic shops of the Diamond top 100 comics rose by 618,510 between May and July this year, from 3,531,807 to 4,150,317. That's a 12.5 per cent rise.

Borderline contacted Diamond Distribution for an official comment.

Barry Lyga, speaking for the distributor, said the company could not release sales figures: "They are considered to be the proprietary information of the various publishers we serve.

"However, I can tell you that comic sales have definitely seen overall improvement as of late.

"In particular, the graphic novel/trade paperback market is burgeoning, having experienced double digit growth in 2000.

"Prospects are good for 2001, especially when one considers the mainstream attention drawn to properties/titles such as Ghost World and From Hell."

He added: "In short, as the largest distributor of English language comic books in the world, we are very happy with the current trend."

Moore chips in with a tribute

MARVEL'S upcoming tribute poster book, Heroes, to benefit the Widows and Children's Funds of the New York Police and Fire Departments and the American Red Cross, has received another boost with the addition of a text piece by Alan Moore, to be illustrated by his Watchmen co-creator Dave Gibbons.

Joe Quesada described the book thus: "While there will be some 'superhero' drawings, for the most part the illustrations will portray Americans doing what they do...it'll be firemen, EMS workers and citizens on the street. Just artists' interpretations of what's going on at this moment."

Borderline spoke to Quesada about the piece, another indicator of the healing of the rift between Moore and older Marvel regimes, which follows the recent solicitation of a trade paperback reprinting Moore and Alan Davis' much admired run on *Captain Britain*.

Quesada said: "Alan and Dave's piece will be traditional with a very interesting point of view that only Alan and Dave could communicate properly," before adding: "I was speechless for a good 15 minutes after reading Alan's words. It's really moving."

Heroes is being rushed into production with a tentative October 17th release, bypassing the usual solicitation procedures, running to 64 perfect bound pages, retailing for $3.50, of which $3.00 of the price is anticipated to be split between the charities.

FEARS were raised about the future of Sony Pictures big-budget *Spider-Man* movie when the company closed its website and asked for the withdrawal of all publicity materials the day after the terrorist attack on New York's World Trade Centre.

The teaser-trailer has been removed due to its use of the Centre's twin towers, out of respect for those injured and killed on Tuesday, September 11. The trailer showed bank robbers being caught in a web between the towers, made by Spider-Man. Spokespeople have confirmed that the footage was used only in the trailer and the film itself is unaffected.

The original movie poster was also recalled because a reflection of the towers was visible in the lenses of Spider-Man's mask.

A new poster will be released shortly, and a replacement trailer will be available in December, to accompany the release of *Lord of the Rings*. The website is undergoing a facelift, with new artwork introduced to replace the material that has been pulled.

The studio has stated that any images of the World Trade Centre that may have made it onto film will be digitally removed from the finished movie.

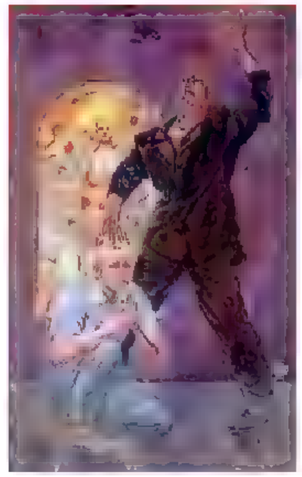
Sony, Marvel and the producers - in making their decision to withdraw the promotional material - said they did not want to appear to be exploiting the tragedy.

It appears the studio recall affects the video and DVD release of *A Knight's Tale*, which contains the teaser trailer. It seems the studio wanted to remove the trailer before releasing the movie. And it seems the Spider-Man attraction at Universal Studios Orlando's Islands of Adventures is also being reworked. The ride features a brief video showing New York being destroyed by Spider-Man villains. In the wake of the World Trade Centre tragedy, this segment is being eliminated.

Variety magazine has reported that the terrorist act is causing Hollywood to reschedule and rework many projects. Arnold Schwarzenegger's October release *Collateral Damage*, which involves a skyscraper destroyed by a bomb, may be scrapped. Barry Sonnenfeld's *Big Trouble* has also been pushed back from its September 21 release.

Last word on the matter goes to Bill Rosemann, Marvel Comics' effusive Marketing Communications Manager: "The film itself is unaffected. The twin towers footage only appears in the trailer, which is being recalled... so the movie is still full steam ahead!"

Delano's Nation Outlawed



JAMIE Delano's Vertigo family saga Outlaw Nation will be going to join that big ol' round-up in the sky. Delano confirmed recent suspicions to Borderline: "Unfortunately the rumours are true: Outlaw Nation will come to a premature end sometime around issue19 or 20."

Delano told us that his plans for the remainder are "working out a way to structure the last few issues of ON in some fashion that provides elements of resolution, but avoids being a futile attempt to tie up all the plotlines I so carefully/carelessly left trailing through the first year's narrative."

Alien Judgement

MEGA City 1's finest lawman faces perhaps his greatest foes in the recently commissioned 2000AD/ Dark Horse crossover series *Judge Dredd Versus Aliens*, written by John Wagner and Andy Diggle, and illustrated by Cam Kennedy with colours by Chris Blythe. Diggle explained to **Borderline**: "Total length should be 16 episodes [to be serialised] in **2000AD**, ie four 24 page US format issues.

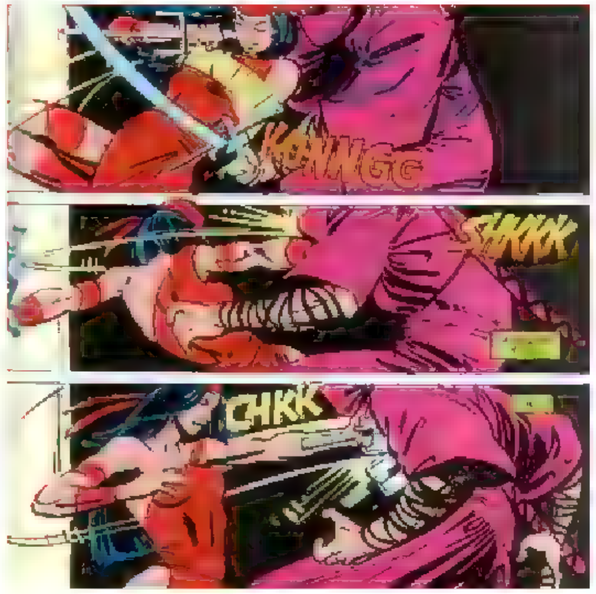
It'll be collected into a 96 page graphic novel in various languages." Pending storyline approval by Dark Horse and 20th Century Fox, Kennedy should be able to start work on the first script shortly.

Bye-bye Bacchus

EDDIE Campbell's Bacchus magazine, the title which launched the Eddie Campbell Comics line, has come to an end - but in its ending is the seed of a new beginning. Campbell told Borderline: "The Bacchus comic, in its last five or so issues, had started to evolve into a different animal altogether. It seemed logical to halt and restart with a brand new approach."

Having recently finished art duties on a chapter of Uncanny X-Men #400 and Snakes And Ladders, based on one of Alan Moore's spoken word performances, Campbell is developing the new project, currently known as Eddie Campbell's Quarterly Art Journal, and intended to have 48 pages per issue.

Going deeper into his plans, Campbell explained: "I already have a long interview article by myself on a relatively obscure 1940s artist who went on to work with Stanley Kubrick on *Doctor Strangelove*. I have the peculiar and intriguing history of a 19th century classical nude painting that hangs in a pub in Melbourne. There will also be a good set of my autobiographical comics, more pages than usual since I have had a chance to rest and reassess what I'm doing, and there will be a piece on the premiere of the *From Hell* movie, and Hollywood."



ELEKTRA'S GOT THE STUFF

Marvel Knights Assassin Makes "The Stuff 69"!

ELEKTRA – the assassin, former foil and lover of Marvel Comics' Daredevil – has become a hit-maker in more than the usual way.

She is featured in the October 2001 issue of **Stuff**, sister magazine of **Maxim**, as part of "The Stuff 69".

The feature compiles the "69 Sexiest People, Places and Positions of 2001." Standing proudly alongside the likes of actress Penelope Cruz and model Estella is Marvel's own mistress of Martial Arts mayhem.

"Marvel Comics' newly revamped ninja assassin kicks ass and seduces men in her skintight red superhero uniform," states **Stuff**.

The men's magazine then quotes Pete Bonavita of New York City's Forbidden Planet as saying "Elektra is hot. She's beautiful and has more depth than other comic characters."

Accompanied by a full-color illustration by **Elektra** cover artist Greg Horn, the Greek goddess stakes her territory at spot #37. **Borderline** can reveal that this is not the first time Elektra has been a hit-maker. On the contrary, this scarlet-clad veteran has been making hits for the last 20 years and has had almost as many comebacks as Sinatra.

For the benefit of **Borderline** readers, we present a run-down of Elektra's greatest hits:

Hit #1 - Kirigi. This was Elektra's first assault on the mountain of success and, like so many other young hopefuls, it took several attempts before this became a bona fide hit.

Hit #2 - Bullseye. The low point of Elektra's early career, when she bit off more than she could chew in the form of the supervillain dinosaur Bullseye. In the end, Bullseye had both experience and ammunition on his side - and Elektra spent nine months in a box.

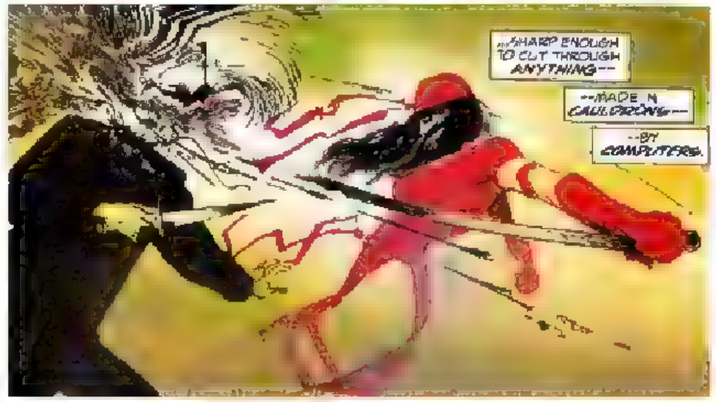
Hit #3 - The Beast. Elektra's comeback hit came in 1987 - after five years of lying low. Some critics saw this as a symbolic - if not literal - exorcism of her demons.

Hit #4 - Perry. The follow-up to The Beast was swift. This time, the target for Elektra's skill was the kind of man who becomes more machine than human being in his attempts to succeed. It was an elegant hit - although some may wonder if the message was not so much literal as metaphorical.

Hit #5 - Bullseye (remix). Several years later Elektra returned to revisit her earlier nadir. This time the hit was huge, and as a result, Bullseye himself - who had just enjoyed a revival of his own - lost his head.

Readers can catch up on Elektra's latest hits in the pages of her comic, published by Marvel Knights.

Pic #1 (Krigi part one). "Going... going... going... The Hand's demonic assassin Krigi shows Elektra there's more to hit-making than wielding a sharp pair of sai."



Pic #2 (Krigi part two). "... Gone! The Hand's greatest assassin eventually lost his head."

Pic #3 (Bullseye). "Elektra came to grief when she ran into New York heartbreaker Bullseye."

Pic #4 (The Beast). "Elektra was never afraid to battle personal demons in her hit-making efforts."

Pic #5 (Perry). "Elektra was all woman - but SHIELD agent Perry proved he was less than half a man. The result was all too predictable."

Pic #6 (The Hand). "Elektra had a way of cutting straight through the middle of any opposition - as The Hand discovered when they tried to revive Bullseye."

To Print Or Not To Print

IN November, Oni Press releases the fifth issue of Queen & Country, the acclaimed spy series by Greg Rucka, with the start of a new story arc focusing on a subject which has become uncomfortably familiar in the last few weeks.

From the solicitation information: "In Afghanistan, the Taliban Militia has arrested foreign reporters as suspected spies. Unfortunately, one of the men taken into custody really is gathering information for the Ministry of Intelligence and was about to relay a juicy chunk of it to MI6 when he was arrested. The Minders have to launch a daring mission on the Taliban's turf to either rescue their source or find where he stashed the goods. The second storyline of Greg Rucka's acclaimed Queen & Country is illustrated by newcomer Rebecca Woods, with painted covers by John K. Snyder III (Dr Mid-Nite)."

Borderline spoke to Oni publisher, Jamie S. Rich, who commented: "In light of recent events in New York City, Pittsburgh and Washington D.C., everyone obviously is looking at world events in a new light. We had begun to lay plans for a Queen & Country story arc, to run in issues 5-7, focusing on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, back in June of this year. Greg wrote the scripts over the summer, and Rebecca Woods has been hard at work on the first issue. The focus of the story isn't terrorism, but the human rights violations perpetrated by this evil wannabe-government.

"Following the events of September 11th, Oni and Greg Rucka had a meeting to discuss the story. Queen & Country was designed as a hard-hitting book about the real world and the dirty things that happen in its shadows. We felt that this was an issue we shouldn't shy away from, and in fact, given the recent tragedy, it almost seemed more important than ever that people learn more about the Taliban. In all of our focus on Osama Bin Laden, it seems to us the media is failing to talk about the terrible human rights violations perpetrated by this regime. They are an extremely oppressive group of people, and everyone should be more aware of what is really going on."

He added: "The arc begins in issue 5, in November. For that issue, Greg Rucka will commandeer the letters column to talk about why the story was written, and we'll provide information on the sources he used to research the material as well as information on charities for relief of the victims of September's tragedy."

Digital Dreams

IN December, Digital Webbing will be publishing a new anthology comic, **Digital Webbing Presents #1**, whose aim is to help creators to get their foot in the door and showcase their creations without being forced into the often expensive gamble of self-publishing. Ed Dukeshire, publisher/webmaster of *www.digitalwebbing.com* hit upon the idea of producing a co-operative venture, where talented writers and artists could pool resources and band together, only paying a fraction of the cost of self-publishing alone, and acting to copyright their creations in the process. Using the Digital Webbing website, which receives thousands of unique hits every day, in order to generate interest in **DWP**, Dukeshire commented: "Most of the oxygen in the comic industry gets sucked up by the big publishers, but the combination of **DWP** and digitalwebbing.com can bring the attention a creation deserves, and give it a chance to live."

As if to prove the point immediately, Marvel Comics has just announced the results of its Talent Search competitions, and both winners are self-avowed Digital Webbing advocates. Ryan Bodenheim, artist of the *Wolverine* competition plotline is a fan, and the winner of the *Thor* competition plotline, Deon Nuckols, is the illustrator of the wraparound cover to **DWP** #1.

Digital Webbing Presents #1 contains nine stories, weighs in at 48 pages, retails at $2.95 US/ $4.00 CAN, and was solicited in the October edition of *Diamond Previews*, for items shipping in December 2001. For preview art from the first issue, go to the Digital Webbing site at: *www.digitalwebbing.com/solicits/?RowID=175*

Positive new direction for teenage Superman

DC's Teen of Steel is headed in a new direction with an all-new creative team, starting in Superboy #94, consisting of writers Jmmy Palmiotti (Deadpool, Ash) & Dan Didio, and the art team behind Jenny Sparks: The Secret History of the Authority, penciller John McCrea (Hitman) & inker James Hodgkins.

In Superboy #94, the Kid must face what could very well be his greatest challenge: finding an apartment! Without his long-time companion Cadmus around, the Kid will need a new place to stay. But Superboy's never lived on his own before, and he's about to discover that apartment hunting is nowhere near as easy as it sounds! Where will he go, and how will he able to afford his own pad? Along the way, Superboy learns the struggle that the everyman has to deal with day by day in a normal life – and he'll find that dealing with super-villains is a piece of cake in comparison!

A departure from the usual superhero fare associated with Superboy, the revamped series takes a more down to earth tone as the Kid goes through many personal changes in his relationships as well as gaining a further understanding of his powers and his true purpose in life. Once he settles into his new pad, a whole new cast of characters becomes a part of his life. Issue #94 acts as a "jumping on point" for new readers; a lot of the comic's previous baggage has been lost, so this may well prove to be a good time to check Superboy out.

Joining the creative team of Palmiotti, Didio, McCrea and Hodgkins is JG. Jones (Marvel Boy), who provides the cover *(right)*. Superboy #94 is edited by Mike McAvennie and ships on November 21, with a cover price of $2.25 U.S.

Ireland's intervarsity event

Comics, SF and horror at Tricon

THE University of Limerick, Ireland, will become a mecca for fans of comics, science fiction, role-playing games, anime or Troma films from November 30 - December 2.

Tricon will be a science fiction Intervarsity taking place at the University. Signed up to appear are representatives from Big If comics publications, Manga Entertainment, AD Vision and cult Irish television show *Blizzard of Odd*.

A special guest will be Lloyd Kauffman, of Troma. Events will range from showings to guest speakers to a conference of societies from all over the island.

Event organiser Rory Devane told Borderline: "My understanding of an Intervarsity is as a gathering of societies and/or clubs from different universities who have a common interest, or interests - in this case science fiction.

"Basically, it is a convention of science fiction societies and any other students who want to come who have an interest in science fiction, comics, anime, Troma films, fantasy, film, gaming and computer gaming."

He said: "We have Lloyd Kauffman and other representatives from Troma coming. Mr Kauffman will be our guest speaker, and we will also be showing the Irish premiere of *The Toxic Avenger IV: Citizen Toxie*.

"Comics publishers Big If Publications are sending people. We will also have representatives from Manga Entertainment, who will be bringing showings of *Street Fighter II* and *Street Fighter Alpha*.

"Also AD Vision people, and people from cult Irish television show *Blizzard of Odd* are attending."

A complete events schedule has not been finalized yet. But Mr Devane said the events will start on the Friday and continue on Saturday, and then wrap up on the Sunday. Saturday will be the main day.

He said: "Ultimately, we want to figure out where science fiction interest is now. Five or seven years ago, sci-fi automatically meant *Star Trek*, but that is hardly the case anymore.

"We know that science fiction fans still do exist, but their interests are diverse and underground, so we have had little contact with each other - interests like anime, comics, and mainstream science fiction.

"Tricon is trying to recreate contact among the different societies of Ireland and among the members. We know they are out there; we just did not know where until we started planning this event almost two years ago."

The Tricon website is at *http://tricon.csn.ul.ie*

Vampirella – Leaving Nowheresville

HOT on the heels of Mark Millar's successful *Nowheresville* story arc, **Vampirella**'s latest tour guide will be new regular writer John Smith, stalwart of **2000AD**. No stranger to vampires himself, Smith's creations include *Devlin Waugh*, a papal exorcist with a distinctly toothy disposition, and the recent **2000AD** vampire/ werewolf Romeo and Juliet serial, *A Love Like Blood*.

Smith told **Borderline** that his tenure on **Vampirella** will be structured "as a series of stand-alone 3-issue stories but with an overarching plotline that will unfold in the background." Regarding his plans for the character, he said: "The first story arc - *Fear of Mirrors* - introduces the first of six otherworldly creatures known as the Hexxen that will return to plague Vampirella throughout my run. These creatures are connected with Vampi in some way - though she doesn't know it yet. But behind the scenes is this mysterious psychopathic character - a Hannibal Lector/John Constantine type figure - who is manipulating Vampi for his own ends, aiming her like a heat-seeking missile at the various human hosts who house the Hexxen."

Asked for some indication as to how he intends to interpret the classic character, Smith replied: "My take on Vampi is that she's 'vagina dentata' on legs and I want to really play up the sex and death angle."

Violent! gets bloody

COLOUR has come to the pages of Action-inspired small press anthology Violent! - thanks to star artist Frazer Irving.

Irving, who rose to fame with his black-and-white *Necronauts* and colour *A Love Like Blood* series for 2000AD, provides the cover for the fourth issue of the comic, available at Dreddcon in Nottingham on September 29, and from that date at selected comics shops and by mail order from the publisher.

Contents include *Rabid* and *Mitch Molotov* - which have both been running since the first issue; new series *Spare Parts* and *Knuckles;* and stand-alone stories *A Mere Maid* and *A Killing in Suburbia*.

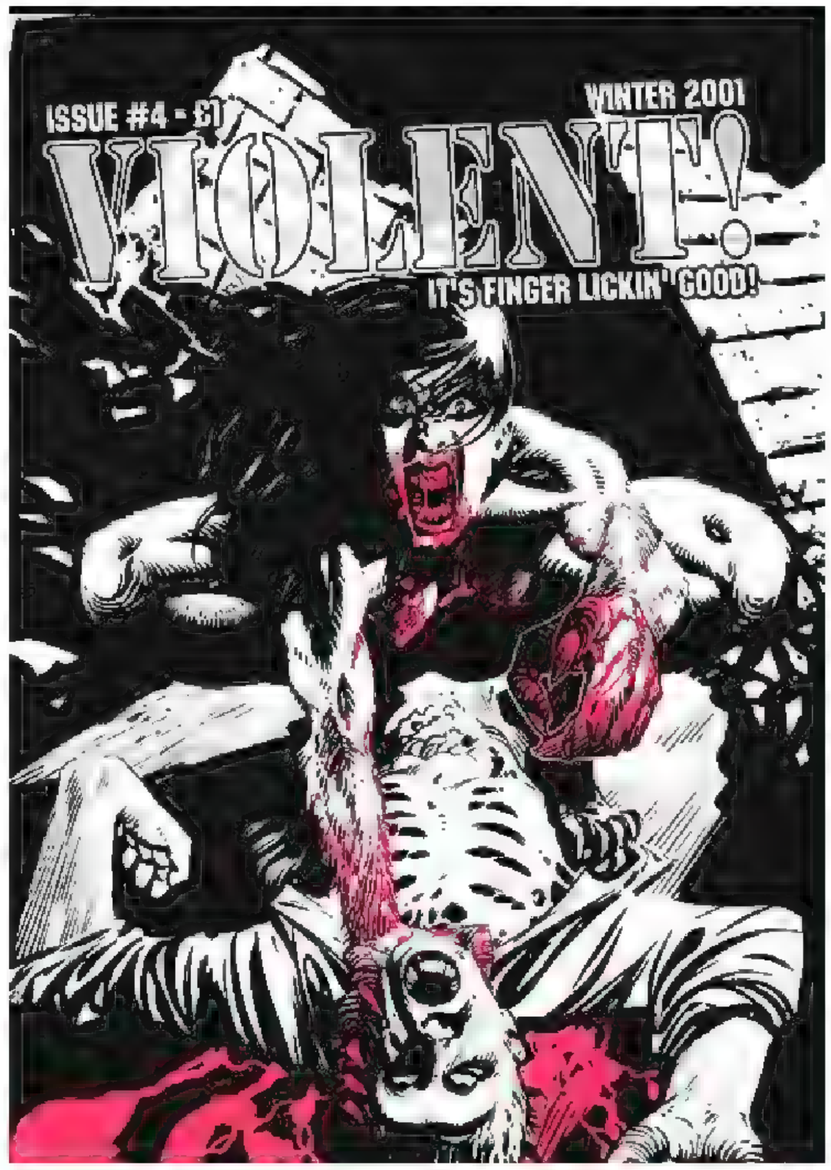
Spare Parts and *Knuckles* are both written by Jay Eales. *Spare Parts*, with art by Peet!, focuses on organ transplants. What happens if you are the recipient of a body part with a mind of its own?

Knuckles takes us into the world of bare-knuckle boxing. The ring is spattered with blood, the match is fixed, and it's hard to tell the heroes from the villains. Simon Gurr tackles the art chores.

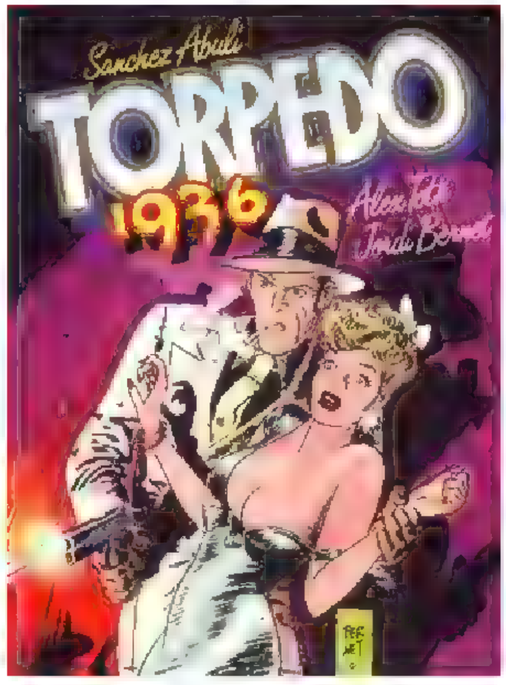
Scottish artist Chow, who previously appeared in the David Hailwood-scripted *Hell's Belles*, returns with the self-scripted *A Mere Maid*, about peril on the sea.

Wrapping up the issue, editor/publisher Mike Sivier scripts *A Killing in Suburbia*, with art by hot new talent Shaun Bryan. It features dead cats, rampaging mobs and exploding bank robbers, and promises that the 'burbs will never seem sleepy again.

Violent! issue four is available from September 29, by mail order from Mike Sivier c/o 9 Greenacre Road, Whitchurch, Bristol BS14 0HL, priced £1.



Mother's Day Surprise!



THE city council of Hull, in Quebec, Canada, has recently approved a decision to classify the adult French language comics in its public library into two types: those for adult readers and those for "experienced" readers (lecteurs avertis). The latter type is now accessible to the public only by special request.

Such albums, of which 170 have been listed, are defined as containing images which are pornographic or demeaning to women. That definition includes, for example, drawings of a nude woman and a clothed man in the same panel. Nhu-Noa Nguyen, a Ph.D candidate at the University of Quebec in Montreal, visited the library to see which albums were locked away. They include:

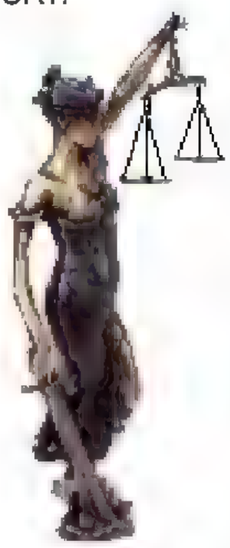
Torpedo 1936, the popular gangster series by Toth, Bernet and Abuli; Indian Summer, the non-pornographic adventure story by Hugo Pratt and Milo Manara; Les Mères, a 1982 album by feminist auteur Claire Bretécher which was selected this year by the French web site BDNet (*http://www.bednet.fr/*) as suitable for purchase as a Mother's Day present.

The local college offers a B.A. course in comics. It is not known whether any council members have taken it.

THE VERDICT
COMICS REVIEWS

THIS MONTH'S JURY:

D.R. Booth
Rob Cave
Andy Cheverton
Jennifer Cole
Phil Hall
Rol Hirst
Mike Kidson
Martin Shipp
Mike Sivier
Andy Winter



Would you like to join our reviews team – The Borderline Psychotics? All you have to do is send a sample of two reviews to Andy Winter: reviews@borderline.mediahall.co.uk and he'll get in touch!

Alias #1
Marvel MAX
By Brian Michael Bendis and Michael Gaydos

The Powers that be at Marvel finally - after the Strange Tales debacle of a few years ago - get behind a mature readers imprint and this is their first offering, wherein Bendis Powers into the Marvel Universe with a vengeance.

Jessica Jones, ex-superhero, is now a private investigator in the familiar Marvel universe. Her super Powers – whatever they may be – are largely put aside in favour of her deductive Powers, used in the service of whomever wishes to employ her. The thing is, Jones' clients often don't like her, the police don't like her and Jessica doesn't seem to like herself very much either. This we learn from her laconic Powers of self-description and the fact that she allows herself to be screwed in an extremely uncomfortable place - yes, "like the back of a Volkswagen" - by Luke Cage, Power Man. Bendis is not at the height of his Powers here, alienating us from otherwise familiar settings with the use of language and situations more familiar from his non-Marvel work.

As if this wasn't enough, even her detective Powers are shown to be little more than her using the Powers of the Internet to trawl for information. This is not a likeable character, nor a very sympathetic one, and this may be the comic's main drawback.

Bendis' writing Powers are well known, but this concept is being done so much better over at Image by that other comic whose name escapes me at the moment.

The Verdict: A disappointment, and a faintly objectionable one at that. (AC)

Avengers #45
Marvel
By Kurt Busiek and Manuel Garcia

This is the kind of story that suits the Avengers down to the ground. A globe-spanning threat from an old adversary, clashes with the US Government, and still time for introspection on the part of the main characters.

Kang the Conqueror has never been better characterised - the reader can actually sympathise with parts of his philosophy. "It is what a man accomplishes that sets him apart," he tells his son, Marcus. "The mark he leaves on the world around him, not the ancestors he can name." It's possible many of the Avengers themselves might agree with this attitude.

Penciller Manuel Garcia is no Alan Davis - but that's not a bad thing. His artwork ably fits the storyline – and many readers might find it sad to see him go after such a short tenure.

On the downside, Busiek seems to be developing Claremont Syndrome, as this tale is a little on the wordy side, and there are too many sub-plots dangling around for this reviewer's liking – you need a score card to keep tabs on everything.

The Verdict: Trade paperback material. In individual issues, this story isn't going to attract new readers – but the collected version will live up to the title "graphic novel". It's gonna be hot! (MS)

Cable #97
Marvel
By David Tischman and Igor Kordey

Get this, fanboys: "Cable reads the newspapers every day - he's teaching philosophy to the people he meets. As their numbers grow - that's when he'll start to see real change." That's a direct quote from this issue's editorial by David Tischman, the new writer on Cable. Yes, that Cable, the Cable Rob Liefeld created to be the biggest gun in the Big Gun Age, is going to use philosophy to save the world.

Dozy mainstream comics and twee, simplistic political "statements" do not mix. Honestly. Unfortunately, as no one has bothered to tell Tischman this, Cable spends this issue "sorting out" democracy and all round un-American activities in Peru, with promises of visits to (among others) Palestine and Ireland in the future.

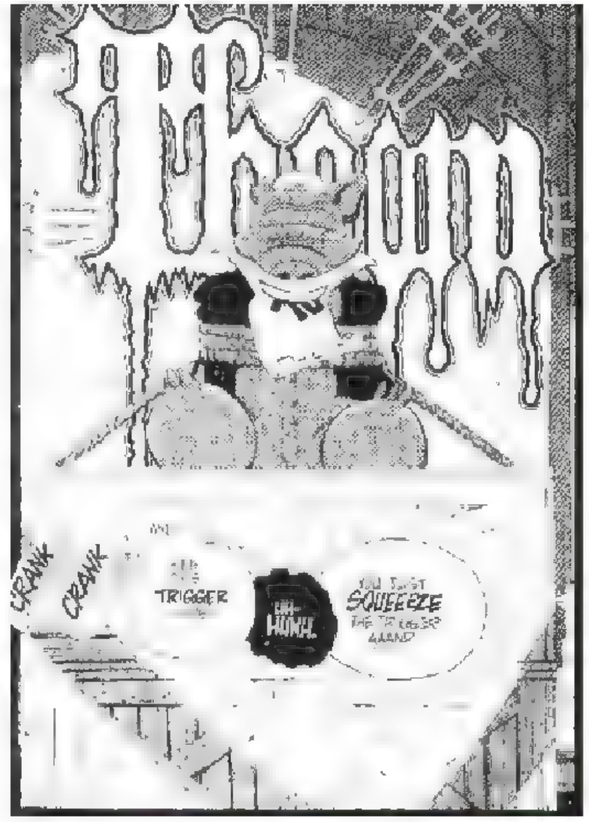
It really is as bad as it sounds, not least because Tischman sounds so desperately sincere about what he's doing, as if sectarian bigots on both sides of the divide are somehow going to think, "Good grief, yes! We could all live together in peace, if only someone had told us sooner!" as soon as they read his clumsy prose. Marvel - why did you let this happen?

The Verdict: Stay away, it's for your own good. (JC)

Cerebus #269
Aardvark-Vanaheim
By Dave Sim and Gerhard

Presumably, Kosher, Mosher and Losher are Estarcion's answer to the Three Stooges. Readers unfamiliar with the '50s and '60s comedy characters - including myself - may have problems understanding some of the humour of the next few issues.

Determined to get himself killed, Cerebus has travelled deep into Cirinist territory and opened a strip-joint. Just



Above: **Avengers** *#45 cover and below a panel from* **Cerebus** *#269*

when it appears his plan is coming to fruition, however, he is kidnapped - by the trio mentioned in the paragraph above – and transported to what appears to be a church of some kind, dressed to resemble the bar our aardvark used to run at the time of his second encounter with would-be messiah Rick.

Yup, he's been kidnapped by religious nuts and - from the look of the narration - he's going to be brainwashed by them, to boot.

The Verdict: Anyone hoping for this series to wind down gently needs to think again. Cerebus will keep you guessing right up to the end. (MS)

Commando Picture Library #3461
DC Thomson
Art by Denis McLoughlin

Still drawing three or four 64-page Commando stories per year at the age of 83, Denis McLoughlin is one of the unsung giants of British comics (although there's an excellent fan web site, *www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Hills/6569/DenisMc/*).

Sadly, this new story is hobbled by a cluttered, ill-focussed script, a too typical Commando effort about three friends coming to terms with personal problems during wartime; but even under adverse circumstances the sumptuous detail, rock solid line-work and balanced panel construction of McLoughlin's work is always lovely to look at.

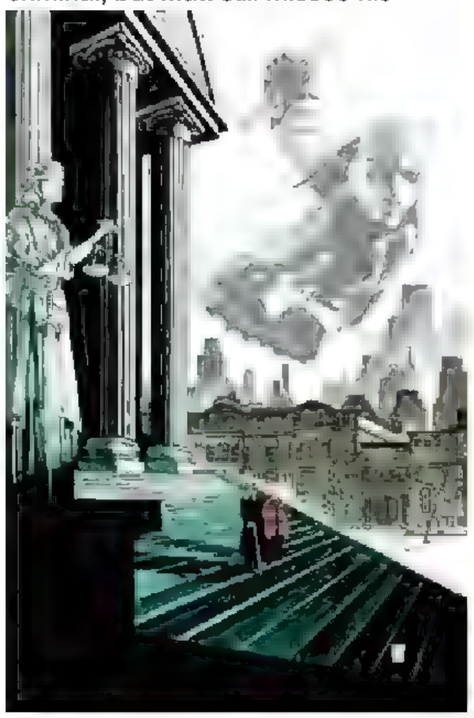
The Verdict: A minor example of McLoughlin's art, but anything he draws is worth treasuring. (MK)

Daredevil: Yellow #4
Marvel Knights
By Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale

A book of two halves this month, with the first part of the comic dedicated to a fight scene and the second half concentrating on more domestic issues. It is telling that the latter part of this issue is the more revealing and enjoyable portion.

Daredevil is up against Electro, whose complacency proves his undoing. Throughout this, DD questions his motives for crime fighting, and whether it is the reason he was given his powers.

Matt Murdock continues to build up the law firm with Foggy Nelson and new secretary Karen Page. The dynamic between the three is honest and engaging, striking chords both in the office and outside it; in this instance, an evening spent bowling. In a more sombre tone, the execution of Slade - the man who killed Matt's father - is painted in grey tones, and captures the feeling that, sometimes, clean justice is not enough. Matt's chosen vocation has succeeded in its task, the capture and punishment of a criminal; but Matt still misses his



Origin #1
Marvel
By Paul Jenkins and Andy Kubert

When this series was announced after weeks of frenzied speculation on the Internet the response was muted, to say the least. This was the Big Project that the American press were desperate to run coverage on? It hardly seems likely, does it? But if there's one thing that Quesada excels at, it's promotion. Even allowing that many fans are reluctant to finally discover the origin of Marvel's most popular mutant, that's not going to stop them reading it; a point that Quesada has certainly factored into his advertising equation. And the announced creative team seemed a bizarre choice; Paul Jenkins, a writer whose plotting and scripting abilities vary wildly from the genuinely touching to the plainly mediocre, and Andy Kubert who, rightly or wrongly, is seen as a slam-bang superhero artist first and foremost.

What would it take for those ingredients to come together splendidly in one of the most satisfying Marvel comics ever to not feature superheroes?

Whatever it is, it's between the covers of Origin # 1, and it's all yours for $3.50.

It is the beginning of the 20th Century and young Rose, 12 years old and with both parents recently deceased, goes to live at the Howlett Estate, where it will be her responsibility to care for young Master James, a sickly child whose father runs the estate with good cheer, whilst his mother - mourning the death of her eldest son some years earlier - creeps around the upper floors of the house like a mobile Miss Havisham.

And there's the groundskeeper, Thomas Logan, a short, violent man with a love of the bottle, and his son, known simply by the children up at the house as Dog, and whose every transgression results in a beating from his bitter father.

In this issue, the characters and settings are quickly and efficiently established and young James, Elizabeth and Dog spend their days playing together in the grounds despite the divide society has placed between them. This is Jenkins doing what he does best; when he has a plot and a direction (and, in this, he is aided by Quesada and Jemas) he really can write a good tale.

The sheer bravery of publishing what amounts to a gothic historical romance is to be applauded because this, obviously, has left the superhero genre far behind and is making its way into Mansfield Park by way of Dickens. And it's all quite gloriously refreshing.

This is helped immeasurably by Kubert's wonderfully restrained pencils and keen period detailing, which is brought to vivid life by the lush digital painting of Isanove. This is a beautiful book to look at.

And by far the cleverest conceit is that, by the end of Part 1, we still don't know which Logan will become the mutant known as Wolverine. There are three candidates - two obvious, one less so - that could be our man, but with storytelling this assured it doesn't seem to matter. In fact, this sort of mystery was a staple of the gothic romances on which this issue seems based. Inspired.

The Verdict: If we must have the ambiguity of Wolverine's origin resolved, it couldn't be done with more style than this. (AC)

father for all that, and another layer to the character of Daredevil is added.

This is exemplary stuff. When Loeb and Sale worked on Batman and Superman, they used the men behind the masks as their inspiration, but here there is a whole world of characterisation unfolding. Matt Murdock and Daredevil each have particular and separate motives, and this series - beyond even what Frank Miller did for the character - is the first to really dig into that polarisation between the lawyer and the superhero and what drives each of them.

The Verdict: The creators - already seen as a classic pairing - are cementing their reputation further with this. (AC)

Defenders #9
Marvel
By Kurt Busiek, Erik Larsen and Ron Frenz

Heaven knows what anyone under a certain age is going to make of this one. Busiek is clearly enjoying writing the book as he remembers it, but the result is something which only people of his own age group or older are likely to relish.

That includes me. And yes, I got a thoroughly enjoyable belt of nostalgia out of reading about Kyle, Val and Patsy, Marvel's all purpose 1970s "rent-a-goon-squad" AIM, the Headmen, a resurrected pre-hero Kirby Monster, and even an "elf with a gun" riff. You don't know what I'm talking about, do you? And that's what may finish this book off once Busiek and Larsen become bored with it.

The Verdict: Under-35? Forget it. Over-35? Love it. (MK)

The Establishment #1
Wildstorm
By Ian Edginton and Charlie Adlard

Fawlty Towers. Man In A Suitcase. Danger Man. EastEnders. The Krays (real). The man who wrote the book that *Get Carter* was based on. Bob Hoskins' character from *The Long Good Friday*. *The Krays* (film). A fictional comprehensive school, and the headmaster thereof. *The Sun & The Baron*.

References to British popular culture, some overt, some less so; all overlaid on an average comic in the hope of making it more interesting than it really is.

Charlie Adlard's art looks like the bastard offspring of Sean Phillips and John McCrea.

The Verdict: You are Lobby Lud and I claim my five pounds. (MSh)

Fantastic Four 1234 #2
Marvel Knights
By Grant Morrison and Jae Lee

Grant Morrison shows he can work just as deftly with established Marvel characters and situations as he does forging a new future for the company's best selling title.

In other words, Fantastic Four 1234 plays with story concepts that have been hovering over the FF for decades - the Thing's resentment at his loss of humanity, his arguments with Johnny Storm, Sue's frustration with her husband's obsession with scientific discovery, her on-off relationship with the Sub-Mariner, and Doctor Doom's status as an "international devil", whilst still being legitimate ruler of his country - to create one of the most involving FF stories for years.

It doesn't hurt that Jae Lee's art is extremely easy on the eye, either.

But this is, so far, a very low-key affair. Presumably the pyrotechnics will start with issue three, judging from the look of the creature that pulls itself up through the New York streets in front of the Human Torch at the end of this.

The Verdict: A tonic for regular readers who feel let down by Carlos Pacheco's run on the main book. (MS)

Fury #1
Marvel MAX
By Garth Ennis and Darrick Robertson

Picture Gene Hackman (as he is now) with a full head of hair, an eye patch and the same attitude he had as Popeye Doyle in *The French Connection* and you get a ball-park idea of what to expect from Garth Ennis and Darrick Robertson's Fury.

The first issue pans out like the beginning of an Oliver Stone film and quickly slips into territory covered in Will Smith's *Enemy of the State*. Nick Fury is an anachronism and this is highlighted by his gung-ho attitude

and his desire to have a new raison d'être. Fury has been promoted so far up the chain, he's effectively drawing his pension. He is no longer the man in charge of SHIELD, he's that covert agency's Stan Lee - the man they dare not disassociate from, but don't really want around the office.

The politics in this first issue is the real reason it works so well. Forget the now patent Garth Ennis brain-splattered scenes - the opening sequence is there to make us remember what Nick Fury used to be, and to cushion the blow of knowing that Nick, who used to play poker with Ben Grimm and Hank McCoy, actually says "Fuck" quite a bit and is prone to blowing the enemy's brains out of the backs of their heads - it's when he enters the world of the talking head that he really excels.

In fact, the only thing that doesn't work in this first issue is how we're supposed to believe that the world of Marvel Comics is actually seedy, foul-mouthed and dysfunctional under the glossy exterior of wholesome family comics. In Alias Luke Cage takes the eponymous heroine up the jacksey, while here Fury exhausts six Asian hookers with his manly prowess. It seems Marvel wants us to know that its superheroes are having supersex and doing it doggy style! But the X-rated stuff aside, this actually moves along at a brilliant pace, one you wouldn't expect from such a character as Fury, who, to be honest, has been pedestrian for the best part of 30 years.

Darrick Robertson's art is of a high pedigree. The man has carved a niche for himself since Transmetropolitan and it sits well with this series - in fact, he seems to have borrowed a few of John Severin's techniques, especially with Nick Fury.

As first issues, especially with a known character, go this is above par in that it gives you the history without going into any unnecessary details, sets the current scene with enough tension to keep the reader interested and introduces enough subplots and twists to keep you intrigued. The only serious problem I'm having with it is that after writing this review I just can't help but think that this will be a similar set up to Preacher. We have the Jesse character, looking for a mission. We have this comic's version of Arseface in Wendell, and I'm half expecting Cassidy and Tulip to turn up in #2 (presumably Dum Dum Dugan and the Countess?).

The Verdict: The swearing grates at times, as some of it seemed

unnecessary, but well worth taking a gamble on, and worth sticking with because it is a classy product. (DRB)

Go Girl! #3
Image
By Trina Robbins and Anne Timmons

Trina is pulling out all the stops here, writing a classic girls' series which mixes messages about self-esteem and socialisation with light-hearted superhero action and even, in this issue, a touch of horror. All of the above have been staples of girls' comics in the past, but rarely have they all been mixed together - it could have been a mess but in fact it's a delight. Anne Timmons' airy, open art and Tom Orzechowski's immaculate lettering help greatly to ensure that all the disparate elements of this fun package are smoothly integrated.
The Verdict: Sometimes they do still make comics like we think they used to be. (MK)

Grendel: The Devil Inside #1
Dark Horse
By Matt Wagner & Bernie Mireault

Dark Horse's welcome reprinting of, arguably, the most creatively ambitious and assured comics of the 1980s continues with this, a representation of Grendel #13, which follows on directly from the last miniseries, Grendel: Devil's Legacy. You could, however, read it on its own as being among the most harrowing portrayals of one man's slide into madness ever written.

Brian Li Sung – ex-lover of the late Christine Spar, the previous Grendel – is living in New York and working as a stage manager somewhere "*way* Off-Broadway". But the memory of his recent experience hangs over him, as he puts up with the worst people have to offer, sliding slowly into depression, violence and, finally, into the embrace of Grendel.

The multiple layers of the script work well; we can follow Brian's story in comic format, but torn pages from his journal litter the panels throughout, illuminating the story further. These are soon followed by the scrawled monologue of the devil inside Brian, providing a harsh commentary as the spirit of Grendel works its way into Brian's mind. With this issue, Wagner really started to experiment with the possibilities of storytelling available with a concept such as Grendel; an experiment that was sustained all the way up to #40, the final issue of the original run. Little else as ambitious as this has been attempted since and that, if nothing else, makes it gratifying to see this work made available again.

Mireault's always idiosyncratic artwork came into its own on this run. His haggard, worn faces say as much about the characters' personalities as the writing, and his detailed, claustrophobic backgrounds are always close to the figures, hemming them in, suffocating them. Rarely have an artist and writer worked so well together and raised each other's game to such a degree.
The Verdict: Spookily, this reprint of Grendel #13 is exactly 13 years old this month. And it is almost certainly one of the best comics you'll read this month. (RC)

Green Lantern #142
DC
By Judd Winick, Eric Battle and Rich Faber

A Green Lantern ring could, theoretically, confer on its user the power of a god, if that's what they wanted. So far, cute and well-meaning Kyle Rayner has battled the bad guys admirably, but he's not the sharpest knife in the box and realising his full potential would take a vision he doesn't have. But it appears that Hal Jordan, in his new role as The Spectre, has plans for his young replacement and the will power-driven ring he wields. In the last panel, a nervous Kyle remarks: "I've never been so scared in my life": in the coming months will this prove to be his salvation or his downfall?
The Verdict: This usually upbeat superhero soap takes an unexpected darker turn. (JC)

Above: Gary Frank artwork for ***Midnight Nation*** *#8*

Midnight Nation #8
Image
By J Michael Straczynski, Gary Frank, Jonathan Sibal

JMS's *other* other series looks like it's rushing to get to the end. The start of this issue takes us to the threshold of New York - and the culmination of David and Laurel's journey. David, *sans* soul, is getting closer to becoming a Walker all the time, whilst also developing feelings for Laurel.

There's a battle scene in which they run the gauntlet of Walkers, but there's no excitement in it. They just wade through this bunch of scary guys. At no point does the reader get the impression they're going to be in serious trouble here. Then David gets to meet his future self - a repeating theme in Straczynski's works, as anyone who has watched *Babylon 5* should recall.
The Verdict: Anyone wanting a JMS fix would be better off buying The Amazing Spider-Man. (MS)

100 Bullets #28
Vertigo
By Brian Azzarello and Eduardo Risso

Barely two issues after the supposed "jumping-on point" of issue 26 and already the plot will be almost impenetrable to the new reader. DC, of all publishers, should be aware that keeping affordable collections in print is a more viable alternative to wasting an entire issue in an attempt to grab new readers.

This is part one of the superbly titled 'Contrabandolero!" and a plot summary would be needless for existing readers and entirely pointless for those of you not already reading this series. What should be said is that this is one of the best comics being published today, to such an extent that few others even come close. This isn't a comicbook that is written and illustrated - this is being *crafted*. For comparative newcomers to the mainstream of American comics, Azzarello and Risso are in complete control of their vision in a way few creative teams ever manage. In fact, with the exceptions of Lucifer and Transmetropolitan, they are embarrassing the rest of the Vertigo line here. It's as simple as that.

When so much comic product these days is barely worth reading once, it is a joy to find something that gives as much on a second reading as 100 Bullets does. Further to that, it beggars belief that almost every new storyline introduced adds to what has gone before, not only by adding layers to it, but by providing a new viewpoint that alters your perception of what really occurred in earlier stories. Sub-plotting of this calibre is practically unheard of in comics - more's the pity.

The art is strikingly clear and stylish, with easily identifiable portrayals of each character - essential in such a complex comic

with a constantly rotating cast - and a masterful control of black and white. Colourist Patricia Mulvihill adds subtlety to the mix, refusing to swamp the art in fancy hues, preferring a simpler, restrained approach.
The Verdict: Almost without peer, 100 Bullets is like a comicbook version of a Coen Brothers movie. This is a unique and satisfying collaboration between two unique talents. (AC)

Spawn #110
Image
By Todd McFarlane, Brian Holguin and Angel Medina

Above: **Spawn** *#110 cover, Corben's Hulk from* ***Startling Stories*** *and Thor (right)*

Spawn's investigation into the cult known as the Kingdom leads to an interview with beheaded vampire Wolfram - and a supernatural battle with a host of other undead. Meanwhile, Max Williams - detective Twitch's son - is drawn further into the Kingdom by the alluring Dawn.

It's strange how horror writers draw upon Christian mythology to depict the history of their monsters, as though they believe Gospel events need to have a dark mirror image somewhere. This story is no different, claiming that the vampires of the Kingdom have their own historical saviour figure.

But Max's seduction into the cult is handled well. This story is proving to be much more involved than many Spawn thrillers in the past, and the comic is better for it.

Angel Medina's art has been criticised for being too much in the style of predecessor Greg Capullo and, originally, McFarlane himself - but it seems the critics have failed to take into account the fact that it works.
The Verdict: Strong story, great artwork; a juicy package. This will probably end up as an excellent trade paperback. (MS)

Startling Stories: Banner #2
Marvel
By Brian Azzarello & Richard Corben

My mother always told me that if I didn't have anything good to say then I shouldn't say anything at all.
The Verdict: Perhaps Azzarello should have been given similar advice. (AC)

Suicide Squad #1
DC
By Keith Giffen and Paco Medina

In which the short-lived Justice League Antarctica become the even-shorter-lived first members of a new Suicide Squad. That's not giving away anything the astute reader wouldn't already have sussed; the book's called "*Suicide Squad*". What do you *think* happens? More of a spoiler occurs on the cover, where a character who's supposed to stay hidden until the Shocking! Final! Page! appears in full glorious colour. SS is still an enjoyable book, though, in which Keith Giffen does what Keith Giffen does best: lots of non-linear storytelling, lots of realistic bickering between characters, and lots of nine-panel grids. Paco Medina pencils in the cartoony, manga-y, Humberto Ramos-y way that 57 per cent of all comics artists use at present. Some pages don't convey events adequately, and there's an obvious paste-in of an explanatory balloon at one plot point.

Still, if you recall the Giffen/DeMatteis JLA with any affection you'll enjoy this, even though my gut feeling is that it'll be, like Chase or Hourman, one of DC's glorious failures, loved by its readers but doomed to an early cancellation.
The Verdict: Enjoyable romp, having fun while clearing away some minor super-villains. (MSh)

Thor #40
Marvel
By Dan Jurgens & Stuart Immonen

It seems killing off characters is back in vogue at Marvel. First the Silver Surfer suffers a wipeout in the pages of Fantastic Four; now Thor scripter Dan Jurgens sends Odin off to his own personal Valhalla.

One has to wonder why. What's the point? Will they be able to leave these characters alone, now they have been killed off —or will they be resurrected, as has already happened with so many Marvel characters between the mid-1980s and now that it gave the company a bad reputation for short-changing its readers?

It's also a shame that this death happened in such a forgettable storyline: Surtur appears in Norway and starts trashing the joint, until Thor turns up, miraculously healed from his recent injuries with a little help from Tarene, and then Odin arrives to bring the fire demon to his just reward - only to find oblivion himself. Not really an epic, is it?

All this means is that the stage is now set for Thor to become the corrupt ruler we have seen foreshadowed in previous issues.
The Verdict: A minor storyline with a major event, which will leave readers with a bad taste in their mouths. (MS)

Tomb Raider #6
Titan
By Dan Jurgens and Billy Tan, David Wohl and Dave Finch

I have no interest in Lara Croft, I've never played *Tomb Raider* - this was an impulse buy, and although I doubt

I'll be heading back for more next month, I enjoyed it a lot more than I thought I might. Its main advantage may be that the rather standard Top Cow/Image art style looks very good in this UK magazine format; although Jurgens scripts a tale of Lara in Shangri-La decently enough, it's Tan's art which makes it memorable. The *Aphrodite IX* backup strip, though, reverses the pattern: Wohl's tough cyberpunk scripting outshines Finch's ho-hum artwork.
The Verdict: There are far worse ways to while away a few minutes. (MK)

Tomorrow Stories #11
America's Best Comics
By Alan Moore and Hilary Barta, Rick Veitch, Joyce Chin, Jim Baikie
This is the only one of Moore's ABC titles to have retained my interest, perhaps because it's the one where he most openly takes the mickey out of superheroics. It has its ups and downs - Splash Brannigan has never really taken off, First American is now nothing more than an excuse for humiliating the title character - but I find it still manages to make me laugh out loud a couple of times per issue. And how many "funny books" can you say that about? However, this issue's special treat is Joyce Chin's luscious art on Cobweb. More, please.
The Verdict: Epics may have made Moore famous, but this title demonstrates that he's also a master of the humorous short story. (MK)

Ultimate X-Men #9
Marvel
By Mark Millar and Adam Kubert
Marvel's slickest comic continues to blaze a trail straight through the middle of pre-existing X-continuity -

and why not?
This is quality writing. Millar knows his characters well and wastes no opportunity for them to impress their particular personalities upon the reader. There's a huge battle to appease the action fanatics, and a shock ending. How will our heroes get out of this tight spot?
We get new versions of familiar villains - Juggernaut and Sabretooth - and villainous versions of favourite heroes - Nightcrawler and Rogue - thrown into the mix. And in the background: Weapon X. How does Nick Fury tie into this covert operation? And what will it mean for the Ultimate X-Men? It's enough to get you all fired up with anticipation just thinking about it, isn't it?
The Verdict: A superhero standard bearer. If you aren't reading it already, why not? (MS)

US War Machine #1-#3
Marvel MAX
By Chuck Austen
Few characters have been so badly ignored and poorly handled in the last ten years as Iron Man, so it was a joy for me to see one of Iron Man's most interesting supporting characters, Jim Rhodes and his War Machine armour, get his own series. That was until I read the first three issues.
Seemingly set outside the continuity of the regular Iron Man series, this follows Rhodes's fortunes after being understandably fired by his boss Tony Stark for killing an assortment of terrorists and hostages. He is recruited by the super spy organisation, SHIELD, to head up a new armour-suited division, in the mould of the old Valiant Armourines title. Apparently murder and negligence leading to the death of a hostage are no longer just crimes but also valuable additions to the resumé for career advancement.
Equally unconvincing dialogue and ham-fisted dealing with issues of race and racism back up the plain illogical nature of the plot, making me wince as I read. The woodenness of its script gives even *Sunset Beach* a run for its money.
As far as artwork is concerned, there are artists and there are illustrators. In the first three issues of a:US War Machine, Chuck Austen proves himself to be an able illustrator. When it comes to the human figure, however, his drawing skills are just not up to the task. The result is characters so stilted and lacking in motion that they almost appear to be G.I. Joe figures.
At $1.50 per issue this is one of the cheapest comics on the shelves, and it's not hard to see why. Lacking in colour, ads and, to a degree, talent, the whole package comes across as being very clumsy. Even the lettering is amateurish.
The Verdict: It may be cheap but this comic is still not worth the price of entry, which is a shame because the idea of the war machine army corps has great potential. (RC)

War Story: Johann's Tiger
Vertigo
Garth Ennis and Chris Weston
Competent military fare from obvious Battle nostalgist Garth Ennis, but there's not a lot here that's new or original - especially for those of us who picked up the same writer's recent Enemy Ace. The predictability of the story's ending erodes a lot of its intended pathos, and all in all you're left with an unsatisfied feeling.
This new foray into traditional war comics for the mainstream is more than welcome (for those of us who grew up on Sgt Rock, Charley's War and D-Day Dawson, anyway), but the formula is getting a little old already. If Vertigo are committed to war comics, an ongoing title with a developing continuity might give room for the variety needed to distinguish one story from the next.
The Verdict: German tank captain laments his bad deeds, and gets his just desserts. (JC)

Above: **Ultimate X-Men** *#9 and just above a panel from* **Wildcats** *#26.*

Wildcats #26
Wildstorm
By Joe Casey and Sean Phillips

No consideration is given to new readers here. Opening the comic for the first time, how is a prospective reader supposed to know whom the woman in the wheelchair is, or why her exchange with a strange old man in a supermarket is significant? Who is the blond guy getting beaten up by a cyborg, while some sinister bespectacled dude looks on? The answers to some of those questions do actually appear - but not quickly. Bye bye, casual reader.

The other thing that rankles about this comic is the lack of sound effects. Sure, they might seem juvenile to those with pretensions about comics. But, in context, they work.

It's a shame, because the story as a whole has much to recommend it. The bad guy is defeated, but take a look at the last panel - is that the supposed good guy deciding to adopt his plan? Interesting.

But the readers are dropping off in droves, so Casey and Phillips have just two issues left to wrap this up.

The Verdict: Roll on volume III. (MS)

Wonder Woman #173
DC Comics
By Phil Jimenez and Andy Lanning

The conclusion, for Wonder Woman, of Our Worlds At War continues Phil Jimenez's amazing overhaul of our Amazon friend.

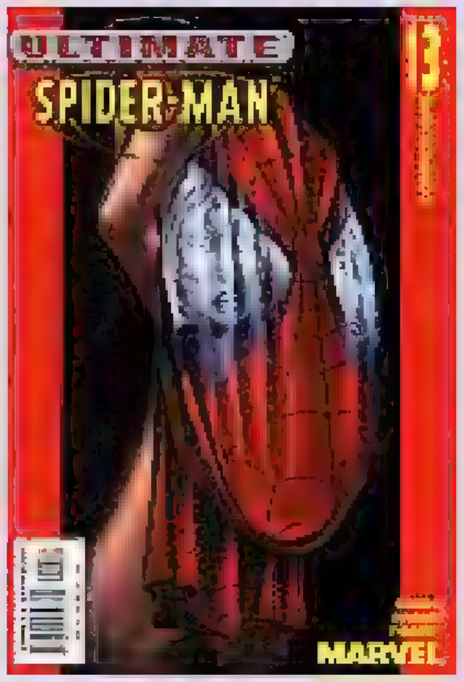
After Hippolyta's death, Diana takes command of forces from Paradise Island, leading them in an attack on Warworld. But this forces a crisis of conscience when she finds she needs to revive Darkseid's flagging powers in order to gain victory.

The moral dilemma is a good one, and Diana's solution turns out to be rather elegant - but the price is high. Themyscira - Paradise Island - is totalled, and hundreds of Amazons are killed, in that nameless way that extra characters in comic stories die.

Hopefully this will lead to serious questions being asked of our heroine in the future. Could she have achieved a solution with fewer lives lost? How will her people live now? Who will lead them, since Diana has already indicated she has no wish to do so?

Questions, questions... Jimenez probably knows the answers, but the rest of us will probably have a lot of fun discovering them.

The Verdict: Sterling work, which proves that good comics can transcend the restrictions of a major crossover. (MS)



Ultimate Spider-Man #13
Marvel
By Brian Michael Bendis and Mark Bagley

People ask, what's the point in starting Spidey's history from scratch when a) we've finally got some decent creators working on the regular books; and b) the originals were so good in the first place?

Ultimate Spider-Man shows us - more so than any of the other Ultimate books - that there are many good reasons to start again, and it's nothing to do with improving on what has gone before. Instead, it's about taking the journey again - passing familiar landmarks along the way – but foraging off in new directions too. It's about making those early events relevant to a new, contemporary audience, many of whom would laugh at the quaint charms offered by the Lee/Ditko '60s version, but also about giving something back to those fans who grew up with the classics - such as making linear sense out of almost 40 years of complex continuity.

Which brings us to USM #13, the issue that - spoilers ahoy - handles Mary Jane's discovery of Peter's secret identity. Back in classic continuity, that story is rather a complicated one. Finally revealed in *Amazing Spider-Man #259* (1984), and expanded upon in the graphic novel *Parallel Lives* five years later, Mary Jane stumbled upon Peter's secret on the night of Uncle Ben's death, yet kept quiet about it for many years. At the time, writer Tom DeFalco took an enormous risk with this retroactive continuity revelation, a risk which paid off in a touching story and a deepening of MJ's character, making her a far more appropriate partner for tragic Peter and ultimately leading to their marriage.

Bendis began Ultimate Spider-Man with all this ahead of him - the fact that Peter and MJ are the perfect couple waiting to happen - as inextricable as Clark and Lois in the reader's mind. Hence one of the major changes he made to the origin story, placing Mary Jane in continuity from the beginning, and immediately setting up the "childhood sweetheart" angle that has proved so heart-warming throughout the title's first year - including that beautifully underwritten moment at the end of issue 5 where Peter breaks down in MJ's arms, mourning his uncle. Bendis has also perfectly captured their blossoming relationship - the growing attraction, nervous glances, awkward smiles and confused emotions that led to their first "date", which, following classic Spidey cliché, Pete blew out due to super-hero commitments. But the "point" of these Ultimate retellings is not just to replay those old clichés... but to find a new way forward.

So, USM #13 - in which Peter takes the brave step of revealing his secret identity to his best friend... and potential girlfriend. Forget history for a moment, forget comicbook logic, and put yourself in the head of a 15-year-old nerd suddenly gifted with amazing powers. That's what Brian Bendis has done... and that's why Peter's confession is the most natural step - for all kinds of reasons. Sharing the burden, impressing the girl, reaching out and putting his trust in a friend, preventing her being hurt by future desertions.

Mary's reaction is priceless, as is the subsequent strengthening of their relationship, and the wonderful scene with Aunt May - one of the characters most "updated" in the Ultimate world, but necessarily so. Throughout the dialogue shines, clearly conveying emotion. Bendis knows well the power of words, and chooses them expertly. And yes, we even get, "Face it, Tiger - you just hit the jackpot!" Meanwhile, if artist Mark Bagley struggles to keep his side of the deal, well... he does at least make some effort. We can only wonder what this book might have looked like given an artist with a more extensive range of facial expressions in his pencil.

Best of all, though, is the wealth of story possibilities opened up by this departure, particularly with the groundwork Bendis has already laid for other members of the supporting cast such as Liz Allen, Flash Thompson and Betty Brant. Not to mention that teasing next issue blurb namedropping one Gwen Stacy... how could anyone miss the point now?

The Verdict: Variations on a theme - faithful yet different, and truly, truly touching. (RH)

X-Force #119
Marvel
By Peter Milligan and Mike Allred

Yet another death on the team knocks the wind out of fledgling leader Orphan's sails before a conflict of interest with the team's one-armed Coach puts him on the wrong side of his team-mates.

Allred's simply-styled art serves to emphasize Milligan's scripting, which this month presents a simple crisis of conscience, muddied by the selfishness and greed of the main characters.

The theme is set by the cover, in which the soon-to-be-deceased Saint Anna declares: "Orphan, quick! I've got to be on 'Leno' in five!" while Orphan himself struggles with the wires attached to Paco Perez's head: "But if I pull the wrong wire... the boy dies!"

Of all the X-books revolutionised this summer, it seems X-Force is the one to watch.

The Verdict: Milligan and Allred continue to breathe fresh air into the stale world of superhero comics. (MS)

X-Treme X-Men #4
Marvel
By Chris Claremont and Salvador Larroca

An introspective issue as the X-Tremes discover Destiny's house in Valencia, come across surprising revelations in a dreamtime meeting with Gateway, and learn that Gambit may be involved in their search for Destiny's diaries.

Meanwhile, the Cajun cardsharp himself tries to burgle Vargas - who is still celebrating the murder of Psylocke - only to find the house more well-defended than he expected.

Claremont crams this more mellow issue with character insights and story clues, making it busier than is perhaps best for it. Maybe as a result of this, Larroca's art looks constricted, as though he tried to get too much storytelling onto each page - let your layouts *breathe*, fella!

Still - surprisingly - this is a comic that grows on you.

The Verdict: The jury's still out on this one - although it is never likely to eclipse its New or Ultimate stable-mates. (MS)

COMICS ALMANACK

Adrian Brown's list of potentially overlooked gems from Previews

COMICS COMPASS

The titles featured here are those which may slip through the comics net. Unlike those from the mainstream publishers, under-ordered indie titles may vanish without trace. The publishers often have less scope to gamble their funds. If you want to support a worthwhile US book in the current market, ordering via Diamond's *Previews* is a must. Let your retailers know what you want to buy.

Sandwalk Adventures #1 *Jay Hosler (Active Synapse)*
Hosler has received much acclaim for Clan Apis, his tales of a beehive, [*www.jayhosler.com/clanapis.html*] and is actually Assistant Professor of Biology at Juniata College, Philadelphia. He uses an amusing and easily accessible method of introducing his academic subject. In his new book he looks at Charles Darwin from the point of view of a follicle mite named Mara, who lives in the scientist's brow... (b&w, 24 pages $2.95)

The Comical Tragedy of Punch and Judy *Christopher Reilly & Darron Laessig (Slave Labor)*
"For the first time in comics, the centuries-old tale of 'Punch and Judy' is told" it says here, and indeed Neil Gaiman & Dave McKean's similarly titled graphic novel is not so much about Punch & Judy. Reilly & Laessig's tale is a compelling kitchen sink drama, as you might expect... There is also some background on the history of "Punch & Judy". (b&w, 48pages, $6.95)

Jack Staff #8 *Paul Grist (Dancing Elephant Press)*
The affectionate and amusing superhero tribute continues, but it's also notable for cameos by various British TV heroes of days gone by - for example, *Dad's Army* characters in an earlier issue. (b&w, 36pages, $4.50)

Berlin # 9 *Jason Lutes (Drawn & Quarterly)*
The start of book two of this excellent novel set in Germany between the wars. We see the historical events through the eyes of a disparate cast, presaging both the Cabaret crowd and the political schism between communism and nationalism. (b&w, 24 pages, $3.50)

Jules Verne's 20,000 Leagues Under The Sea, *adapted & illustrated by Gary Gianni (Hieronymus Press)*
Gianni's exquisite illustration style recalls the black and white plates from adventure novels of the past, so he is the ideal person to produce this. It's a signed & numbered limited edition, large format (8" x 12"). Limited to 1,000 copies (56 pages, b&w, $25.00)

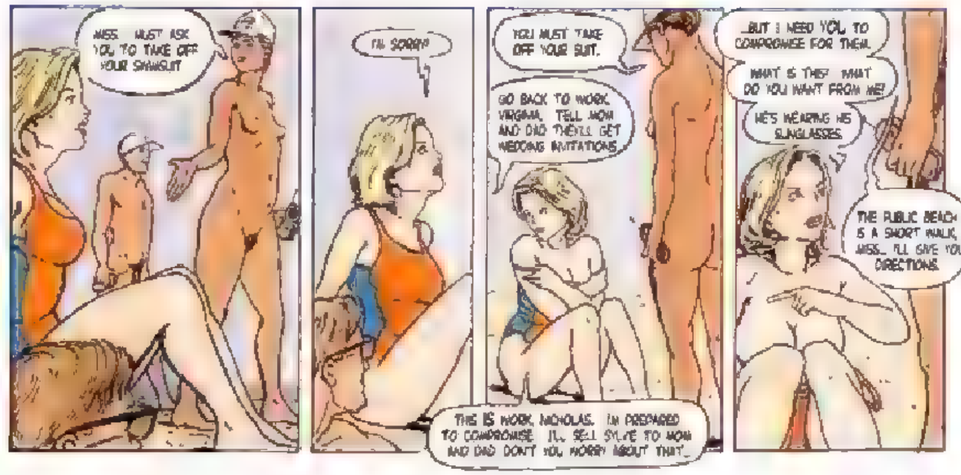
Hammer Of The Gods Color Saga *Michael Avon Oeming & Mark Obie Wheatley (Insight Studios Group)*
More Norse mythology and action in this fine series. To get some idea of the art style, think of the clear lines of Oeming's Powers or the DC "Adventures" animation style. [*www.insightstudiosgroup.com/oeming/hog_intro.htm*] (colour, 48 pages, $4.95)

Killer Princesses #1 *Gail Simone & Lea Hernandez (Oni Press)*
It's *Charlie's Angels* with humour - see the online previews at the Oni site [*www.onipress.com/kp-online1.shtml*] - by Gail Simone, writer of Marvel's forthcoming Night Nurse miniseries, and Lea Hernandez, author of Cathedral Child : and Clockwork Angels (solicited last month). (b&w, 32 pages (1 of 3), $2.95)

BL

THE VERDICT ROUND TABLE

WEARING A SMILE
HENRY COBBOLD & TIM MAJOR W/ ROSINA LYTTON
THE 39 PRODUCTIONS



Phil Hall:

ON one hand this is a pile of stereotypical nonsense. Yet on the other it manages to unlock something inside you after you've read it.

In places it reads like a bad *Carry On* film, in others it has all the finesse of an American coming-of-age type teen flick. The characters are all either unbelievable or levered into the plot to give it a little more... room.

Doesn't sound very good, does it? *Au contraire*, *mes amis*. It feels like wish fulfilment, vanity publishing and titillation rolled into one and, frankly, it is. But I believe the mark of a good piece of work is the effect it has on you *after* you've read it. I tried desperately to pick this album to pieces, from the hackneyed dialogue to the stage-managed scenes, but it kept reminding me of something. It was like something out of the 1970s, when times were simpler.

Nicholas is a spoilt rich American kid on holiday with his parents in Europe - a place which the folks think is decidedly "yesterday". Nicholas likes it and decides to spend a few more weeks hoofing it around the place, before he returns to help run the family steel business. Then he meets Sylvie, chasing a herd of pigs. Sylvie is "the most beautiful girl in the world", so it's not implausible that Nicholas should fall head over heels in love with her. Not only is she gorgeous, she wants to be a heart surgeon and has an easy going, anything but xenophobic, family.

Nicholas extends his own vacation and goes on a family holiday with four generations of Sylvie's family. Unfortunately for the extremely sheltered American boy, the destination is the largest nudist colony in Europe. Cue "hilarious" faux pas, followed by some cringeworthy dialogue. The denouement is incredibly contrived, but tries to show how the USA and France differ in their attitudes and philosophy. If anything, it tries a bit too hard to say that the American nation is pious and full of inverted snobbery, but not necessarily the American individual.

Teenage summer love affairs with a foreign exchange student: it doesn't happen to everyone, but it happened to me. 22 years later I look at Nicholas and Sylvie's story and think, "Gee, I wish that had happened to me".

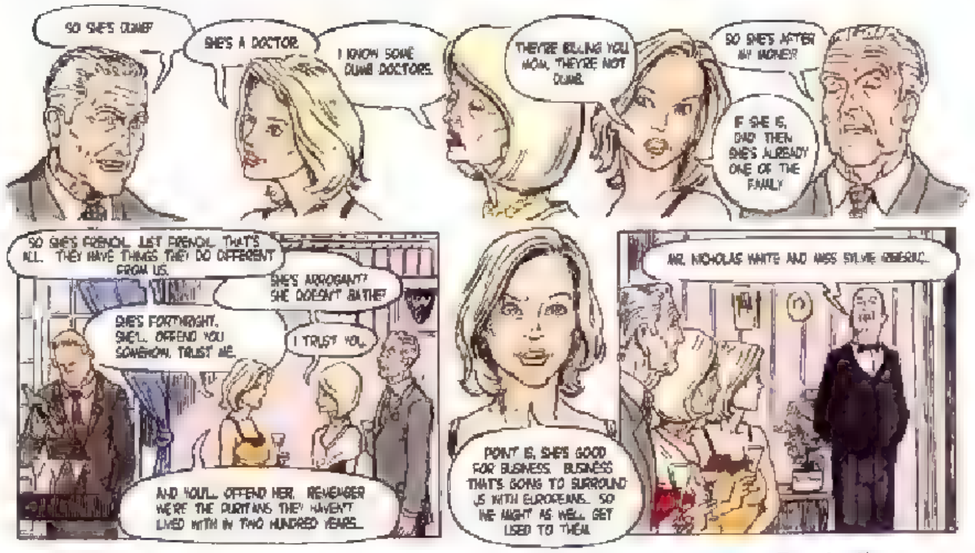
I can't really see the point in producing this book; in terms of offering anything innovative to the medium it fails on all fronts, yet it has an endearing charm, a *je ne sais quoi*. It is harmless fun, it just happens to revolve around the theme of nudity and different cultures' treatment of it. The fact that it doesn't really address the taboos at all but uses them as levers into another comical scenario should be annoying, but the tone is set very much from the first page.

Tim Major is an artist I know nothing about. He has obviously been using influences from all over the world for this project. The cover of the hardback could easily have been influenced by Arthur Adams, while the art's main roots lie firmly in the European school. However, while he draws some pages with real enthusiasm and skill, others would not look out of place in a small press project and he really should have rubbed out his pencil lines better. Despite the fact that Major draws most characters naked for 50% of the time, it comes across as anything but a wank mag. With the exception of Sylvie, most of the women portrayed are anything but sexy. But the art isn't that detracting and it is used in a cinematic way. For the majority of the book and all of its unashamed nakedness you only see one penis - that of Michelangelo's David - all other members are hidden by either word balloons or carefully placed household objects. The appearance of a real penis (or three of them in fact) was again only used to gain a laugh, when Cobbold might have been better off trying to illustrate points about attitudes...

Mike Kidson:

Have you finished? Can I get a word in edgeways now? Great... well, given that your taste in comics isn't generally quite the same as mine we seem to have to come to some very similar conclusions here. At first reading I wasn't impressed by Wearing a Smile - it struck me as being overwritten to the point at which the script left no room for me to make my own interpretation of the story and any meaning it might have. Consequently it struck me as shallow, superficial... everything seemed to be presented in detail on the surface, to be taken at face value, so I felt it lacked depth. Majors' art didn't help to dispel that impression at all; to be fair he's very much an illustrator rather than an equal collaborator, but he doesn't appear to be very experienced at drawing comics. He goes through the formal motions expertly enough, but time and again there are sequences where he appears to have drawn panels from slightly different points of view simply to avoid the "talking heads" syndrome. The result isn't really good comics and, obviously because of the static nature of print, it isn't good film either... it's just filling in the space, albeit attractively enough.

So I didn't get much out of it. By 24 hours later, though, I was still experiencing little flashbacks, still thinking about the story - and that doesn't usually happen when I'm not impressed by a comic. You're right, there's something about this album which captures the attention, which stays with you - and I can't put my finger on what it is either. That's a hard thing for a self-styled critic to admit to; we like to come up with Answers (even if there aren't any questions...)! But all I can conclude is that this album is somehow much more than the sum of its parts. The characters, with the exception of Sylvie who is given a good line in asking blunt, searching questions, may be superficial, the rather heavily suggested contrast between the relaxed Europeans and the uptight Americans may be delivered with a bludgeon, but... it's entertaining. That sounds weak, but I think it may be the answer I'm looking for. Entertainment doesn't have to be "mere" and it certainly doesn't have to be meaningful, but it helps a lot if it's reasonably rich in detail - and that may



just be what Cobbold and Major have achieved here.

To sum up: given that there's no particular history of British creators coming up with airy, entertaining European-style comics albums, I find this venture very encouraging even if I'm not quite sure why! If the publishers are indeed planning to follow this up with further album-formatted projects, then I'd say that they've got off to rather a good start here. Martin?

Martin Shipp:

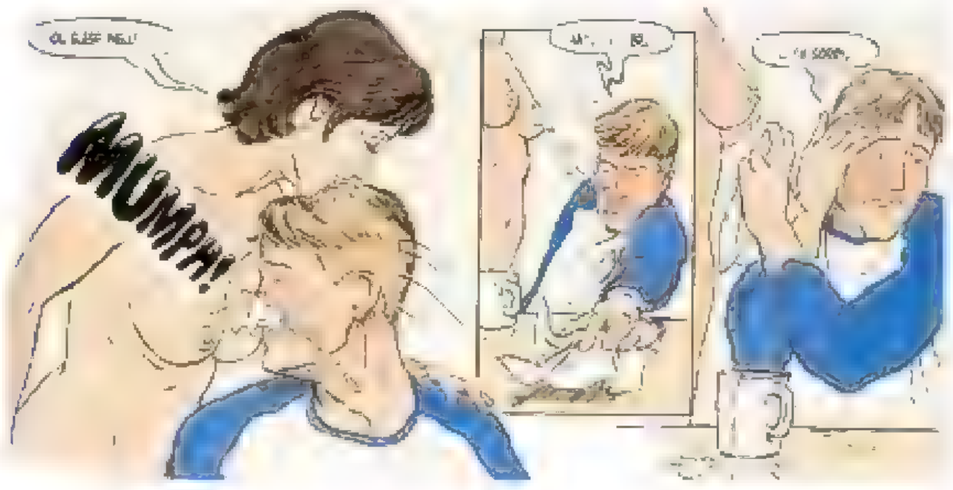
Yeah, give me the job of finding something other than what you've said.

I'll be blunt: I've seen better produced graphic works in terms of both verbal and visual executions, but Wearing a Smile left me with one very important question; why aren't there more books like this?

There's endless whingeing on in the comics fraternity about outreach and new readership, but all that ever seems to come from the majority of English-language publishers is yet another genre piece. If Wearing a Smile fits into a genre it's the little-known one of "naked cartoon French people",and when did you last see an entrant in that field?

Alright, the art's a bit weak in places, and the staging is a bit off - what should be dramatic scenes seem to be crammed into remaining space in the corner of the page - and both plot and dialogue occasionally seem to come from an entirely different book, and the reader has to do a little work in figuring out who some of the characters are, but none of that's going to kill anybody, is it?

I'll admit I'm unfamiliar with any previous work in any medium by Henry Cobbold, whose seeming Francophilia means he pays more attention to the French characters and gives them the better lines, while the Americans - with the possible exception of the lead - seem a bit stilted, a bit crude, especially the brother-in-law who resembles a penis even when fully clothed (and who has an absolute whopper - the biggest dick having the biggest dick?). Tim Major's worked for The Erotic Review, and his art here looks a bit off from time to time, with a strange swing from the standard comics-realistic to the almost cartoonish. But having said that, the cartoony stuff works nicely, making the more comedic sections of the book come off as lively and enjoyable. There's an early scene set at a French country party that almost brings the sound of pastis-addled accordionists into your front room. But then again, certain panels - particularly the larger pictures of Sylvie - look taken from photos and lose some looseness and spontaneity as a result. They're still not actively bad, though, and even when the pencilled/inked art weakens, the colouring is pretty enough to pull it through.



But despite all these reservations, I honestly enjoyed it. It's one of those books that make you smile in spite of yourself, where joie de vivre wins out over cynicism both within the pages and without.

So, like I asked: why aren't there more books like this? With its durable album format - it goes so far as to call itself "a 39 bd" on the cover so we know what its intentions are - and adult content that isn't mindless violence or blatant pornography, Wearing a Smile could quite easily be the kind of comics that can be shown to the general public and, more importantly, enjoyed by them. It's like the missing link between Asterix and Milo Manara. I don't know what The 39's distribution plans are, but they really ought to be trying to get this into as many bookstores as possible.

Until that happens, I'd suggest visiting the website and looking into getting a copy direct from the publishers. And I don't do that often.

Over to a man with the same initials as me. Mike?

Mike Sivier:

I went into this with a few reservations - the main one being that I might be reading a manifesto for naturism. I came out of it thinking much the same thing - that I might have been reading a manifesto for naturism. Then I thought of a great practical joke to play on some of my more prudish friends: sit them down, tell them I've been reading a book with lots of people running around naked in it, that the argument had been quite persuasive, and I was thinking of becoming a naturist myself, right now. Then start unbuttoning my shirt and watch their faces turn purple.

It would be a lie, though. The book didn't brainwash me into anything I had not previously considered. It did leave me thinking I had read a fun story, featuring characters that enjoy life. That's unusual in a lot of comics nowadays, and therefore very welcome.

What's more, it's a complete story that one can read, at leisure, over a single afternoon. It's structured like a film (obviously, because it's based on a screenplay) with a beginning, middle and end - which means it also corresponds with a novel. Can you see where I'm going with this yet? As a novel, in a more enlightened world, one could probably expect to see it racked up next to prose fiction on the shelves of high street bookstores.

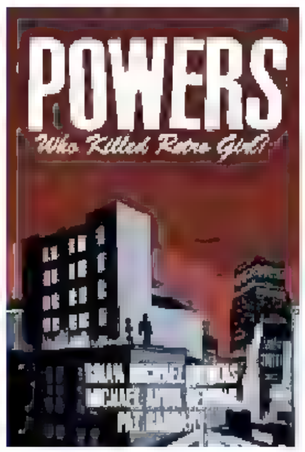
I know I'm echoing Martin here, but why *aren't* there more books like this? I wouldn't say it was the missing link between *Asterix* and Manara, although I would agree that it was a progression from cartoon-style books like *Asterix* and *Tintin*. What we're looking at here is a progression to mainstream fiction, coming from a publisher not previously linked with comics. That might be an important step forward, if the right eyes get to see it.

However, there is a sticking-point. The focus on a taboo subject may relegate it - in the eyes of many - to minority interest or curiosity value. I think we all need to see a few more efforts like this to test whether the ground is safe for comics to start talking about the same things as (in this case) comedy films, and on to adventure fiction, psychological dramas, romance, thrillers... you name it.

It's an experiment, and a flawed one at that. But it's definitely a worthy one, and it's definitely worthy of your time. BL

THE COLLECTED VERDICT

Powers: Who Killed Retro Girl?
Image Comics
240 pages/$21.95
By Brian Michael Bendis
and Michael Avon Oeming



Have you ever had your suspension of disbelief wrenched away from you? You're watching a film and just at the crucial showdown the mike boom swings into view. Or you're really getting into a televised musical performance when the singer forgets the words and stops moving their mouth, but the vocals keep on going regardless. Every shred of belief you invested in that experience suddenly disappears quicker than a lottery winner's dress sense.

Powers could have been a good book, though certainly not a great one, but a number of things get in the way. Brian Michael Bendis's writing, for example, may have worked better in monthly instalments, but when collected certain things become apparent. The "naturalistic" dialogue, for example, which seems to consist of having characters repeat the beginnings of their sentences.

The plot has flaws also. A whodunnit - which is what Powers is - relies on having a number of equally likely suspects, which is what Powers doesn't have. Yes, it has lots of entertaining cameos, but as these are around for roughly one panel each and as they are for the most part characters from other series and as such couldn't be genuine suspects, they come across as in-jokes. They're the equivalent of George Clooney and Noah Wyle guest-starring as doctors on *Friends*. Powers also refuses to act conventionally in that the actual culprit doesn't appear in the story until he's actually in the frame (in at least two senses). Yes, it breaks convention, but yes it also cheats the reader out of the joy of saying "I knew it was him all along".

The two main characters don't quite come off either: male lead Detective Christian Walker harbours a secret that's blindingly obvious to anybody at first glance, or at least to anybody who's ever read a basic superhero comic. His female partner Deena Pilgrim simply irritates; her comment about wearing "cute little belly shirts" would make a supposedly hard-boiled detective like Walker demand that she be transferred as far away as possible, post haste. Still, it's always good to see that somebody's read Bunyan, isn't it?

Michael Avon Oeming's art looks very pretty, kind of like a looser Bruce Timm, but he lets himself down with the overuse - again exposed by collection - of repeated images. There's a reliance on photostats to produce this repetition, especially in scenes of extended dialogue, and there's nothing wrong with this; Dave Sim's been doing it for the better part of 25 years and it's an effective way of suggesting a static scene without simply using a splash panel. Oeming, though, uses enlargements of photostats to suggest cinematic slow zooms in or out. These copies aren't touched up in any way, so the enlargement process makes each successive image cruder; if this is meant to be an intended effect it doesn't have a contextual justification. The resultant effect is to alienate the reader and again breaks the story's spell.

Bendis and Oeming have a problem with double-page spreads, as well. A two-page spread consisting of many small panels really ought to have some kind of visual signage that takes the reader's eye away from its usual page-to-page, top-to-bottom progression and inform it of the new, wider, page-across-page progression which is in essence a reversal of the normal reading pattern. Unfortunately, on many of the double-page layouts in Powers, there's no such indication and the reader continues in the ingrained pattern. The only clue that the sequence should be read across two pages is that all of a sudden the dialogue makes no sense.

Having pointed out these flaws, it's only fair to say that this collection contains far more than just the first six issues of the continuing series. There's a copy of Bendis's script for the first chapter, some unused covers, and some very nice sketchbook pieces that make you glad Oeming toned down the almost perfect rectangularity of Walker's head from his original visual.

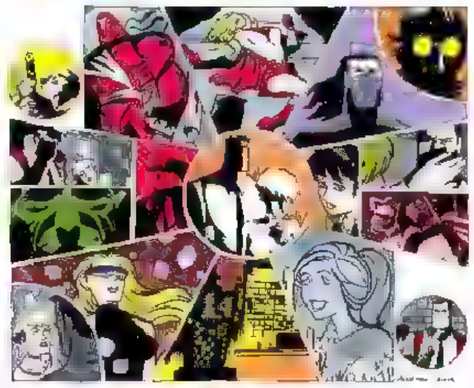
Where Powers: Who Killed Retro Girl? fails most, though, is out of the creators' hands. Bluntly, this fairly expensive 'definitive edition' suffers from shoddy editing. On the back cover, the murder victim is named "Retro girl" (sic). The loss of one capital letter may not be a crime, but come on, didn't anybody at Image bother to check the copy?

Inside the book, simple avoidable mistakes occur: a line of dialogue is repeated both above and below its accompanying image, giving the impression that the speaker either has an awful stutter or perhaps just likes to impersonate Foghorn Leghorn; dialogue balloons are attributed to characters who aren't in the scene, character's names are spelled differently from panel to panel. And at the end of every chapter: "To Be Continued". Again, in 32-page format the reader may need to be informed that they have to come back for more; in a "definitive edition" the reader can see there's still a chunk of book left to read. All the "next" blurbs do is break up the story's flow again. Would it have been so difficult, or so costly, to have the art touched up so these were no longer around?

These aren't sacking offences in a regular format monthly, but they really should have been seen and removed from a high-ticket collection. As a result of these tiny, correctable errors, the reader is yanked out of his involvement in the story and slapped around the face with the realisation that he's only reading a book. There's a mike in shot.

At the very end of the collection there's a full-page house ad for Image's other trade paperbacks, or "fine books", as the text would have it. On this single page there's one glaring example of very bad type layout, and a strange new word, "defintive" (sic), appears three times in 12 words. If that's the level of care shown by Image's editors and proofreaders, it's no wonder so many careless screw-ups appeared in the body of the book. Who killed Retro Girl? To be honest, by the time I got to the end I didn't care.

The Verdict: A potentially good book spoiled by editorial laxity. Save your money for a revised edition. (MSh)



THE CLASSIC TPBK REVIEW

Daredevil: Born Again
Marvel
180 pages/$16.95.
By Frank Miller
and David Mazzucchelli

It's a great plot, of course. The Kingpin destroys Matt Murdock, taking from him his job, his home, his friends, his reputation... even his sanity.

You can't really go wrong with a plot like that. But this is Frank Miller at the height of his powers, and the plot - which itself moves faster than Wally West - is secondary to the handling of character. And every character here is handled perfectly. From the heroism of Ben Urich, risking everything for his vital exposé, to the utter degradation of Karen Page, selling Daredevil's greatest secret just to fill her arm. Then Captain America shows up in the final chapter and Miller demonstrates a rare understanding of the super-soldier, and a plot climax that twists every way but the way you expect. Even J. Jonah Jameson gets a defining speech, in little more than five panels.

Mazzucchelli gives a near-perfect riff on the old Miller/Klaus Janson art routine, but adds a few notes of his own as he settles in, while the script is lean but tasty, always moving the story forward, never wasting a word.

The Verdict: Not just the definitive Daredevil - but the definitive Matt Murdock, Ben Urich, Karen Page, Kingpin, Foggy Nelson and Captain America too. (RH).

ZINE SEEN

The Amazing World of Ghosty
£2 (in postage stamps) from Evil Wee Comics, c/o Deadhead Comics, 27 Candlemaker Row, Edinburgh EHT 2QG, Scotland

John Miller's comics are definitely an acquired taste, but many people have found it easy enough to acquire, including me. Strangely disconcerting single page strips celebrate the joys of getting bladdered while listening to Grateful Dead albums and reading old comics; telepathic messages, psychotic postmen and wee jam rolls abound. Although there are no invading alien monsters here, Miller somehow captures the phantasmagoric atmosphere of the late 1950s US mystery comics and infuses it with everyday unreality; the result is trivial in the best sense of the word.
The Verdict: A unique, strange and very happy vision. (MK)

Bulldog Adventure Magazine #2
Enquiries to kingsunset@yahoo.com or http://www.bulldogcomic.co.uk

After a few years off, Jason Cobley has revived one of the UK small press stalwarts of the '90s - and so far it's looking pretty good. *Spooks Fog*, a new series which appears to depart from the war-wracked alternate Earth of Winston Bulldog, shows as yet unrealised promise, a new story by Paul J Holden and Patrick O'Connor looks very attractive, Crow's raw scratchy art on a flashback story is powerful and striking, while the reprint of Ki-Rin's *Nippon* storyline offers another chance to see one of the most original combinations of Western and manga art styles around. Altogether, Cobley's slightly sarcastic vision of British traditions remains highly entertaining.
The Verdict: Ripping good fun, chaps. (MK)

Chiaroscuro #1
Meanwhile Studios
By Troy Little

You might have to look hard for this one, because the cover is designed with a very fine watercolour illustration on the right-hand side and a slight, uninteresting logo on the left. Which means that is all you will be able to see on the racks of your local comic shop, by the time they've spent valuable time covering up half of every comic cover on the shelf with the comic to the right of it. The lettering on the cover of Chiaroscuro says 'Patchwork', if it's any help...

It's worth seeking out, because Little has a detailed cartoony style - pitched somewhere between Zander Cannon and Nabiel Kanan - that uses the black and white style almost faultlessly, with pacing that most other artists would kill for. He might be forgiven a little immaturity in the script with art this good, but even this would be a quibble.

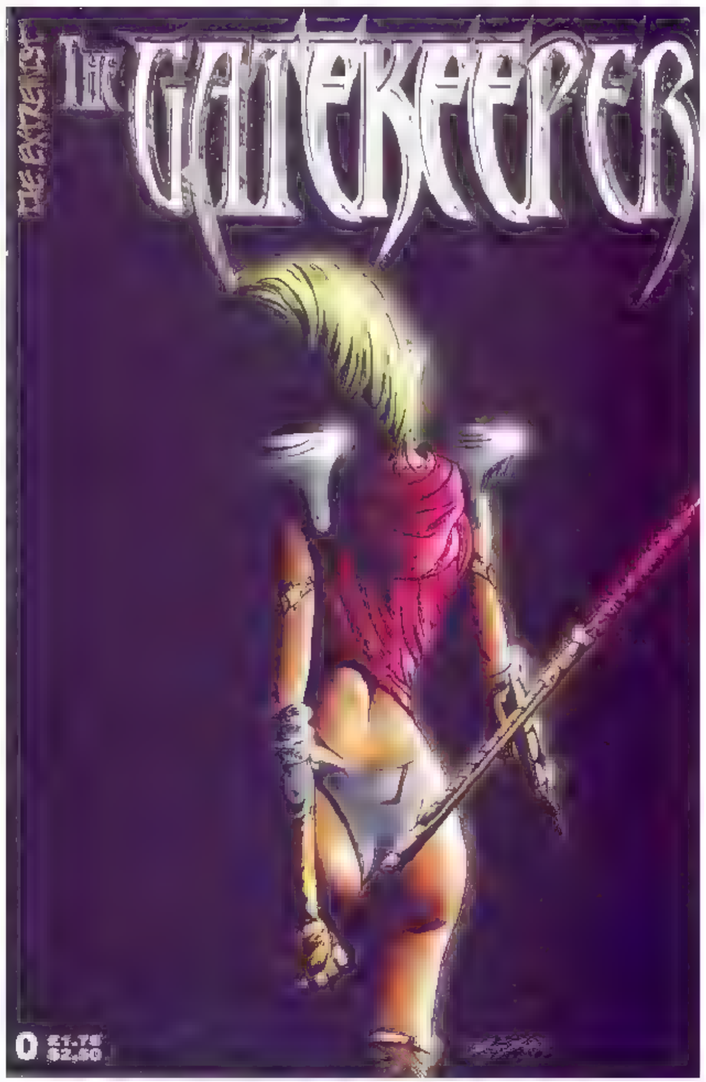
The story concerns Steve Patch, an artist who screens his calls, is always late, bemoans everything and seems generally aimless; but is also cynically amusing, naively charming and refuses to lend books to people who don't look after them carefully. He visits his friend Anthony, chats while drinking his coffee and smoking his dope and then is walking home late at night when he sees a mysterious girl who vanishes into the shadows. And any problems you might have with Steve's personality are dispelled on the last page, with a final comment that reveals either an insecure interior or a fine sense of irony to the character.

This sounds slight in summary, but the pleasure here is in the telling. Little can handle facial statement beautifully, adding characterisation as much with his art as with his script. His dialogue also adds detail to his small cast, which is a skill underemployed in comics.

Not much happens in this issue, nor is there a cliff-hanger ending, but I am intrigued to read further - moreover, I am *keen* to read further, which is a rare thing nowadays when too many of us buy comics based on nothing more than a sense of loyalty to a particular character or a company.
The Verdict: Assured in both the script and art, this is surprisingly high quality for a first issue by an unknown creator and, although this is let down by a poorly thought out cover which may render it invisible on the shelves, is well worth looking out for. (AC)

Doctor Sponge #1
75p & A5 SAE from Chris Askham, 9 Balmoral Grove, Colwick, Nottingham. NG4 2GB

While not as instantly accessible as his previous solo project, Ally & The Big Man, the first episode of Chris Askham's Doctor Sponge bodes well for an intriguing series. The eponymous "hero" is a lunatic running his own private asylum, a regime of Electro-Death Therapy that wouldn't be out of place in Dredd-world. On his way to a confrontation with Sponge is the mysterious General Synod, a hulking sadist who appears to combine the worst aspects of religion and warfare in one heavyweight package. Artwise, Askham's style takes on a slightly more Manga-meets-Miller approach than usual.
The Verdict: Cruel humour combines with sharp visuals to whet our appetites for a promising new series. (RH)



Dumbass Comics #2
£1.25 from Neill Cameron, 70 Godstow Road, Wolvercote, Oxford OX2 8NY, UK, or contact neillcameron@hotmail.com

Hah! I like this guy's warped visions! I'm not quite sure why he chose to set his main story, of disco degradation, drunkenness and dirty sex, in the far future, but with powerful pro-standard art and punchlines like these, who cares? I may even prefer some of the shorter strips, especially the one in which Britney Spears discusses the existence of God, but it all adds up to a very strong package in which Cameron demonstrates an impressive mastery of a wide range of styles.
The Verdict: If your stomach's strong enough to take the kind of punch this delivers, go for it. (MK)

The Gatekeeper #0
By Nicolas Papaconstantinou, Tim Normanton and Eamon O'Donoghue

This is a 16-page, full-colour taster for what will hopefully become a regular title from publisher O'Donoghue. The story concerns Jake, a typical Brit man-child suffering from a severe case of 21st century ennui, and still drinking in his student union bar four years after graduating.

When he stumbles across a couple of extra-dimensional bad-asses trying to lay the smack down on a young girl, he's bailed out of bother by a powerful and curvaceous woman dressed like an Amazon with the keys to the Star Wars wardrobe department (presumably The Gatekeeper of our title?), who proceeds to whisk him away to... where?

There's a lot to enjoy here, from its sexy, evocative cover to Papaconstantinou's economic, involving story, which effectively introduces The Gatekeeper's main characters, chucks in a bit of beat 'em up action for good measure, then leaves us wanting more with an intriguing ending - no mean feat in just 11 pages of actual story. O'Donoghue himself makes full use of the colour format, using lots of dark blues and shadowy greys to accentuate the air of mystery and portent which informs most of the action here.

On the down side, some of Normanton and O'Donoghue's figure work is a little awkward, particularly in a bar scene at the beginning in which a couple of background characters look as if they're hovering above seats rather than actually sitting on them, and again later on, when we catch our first full-length glimpse of the book's titular heroine (foreshortening's a bugger, isn't it?).

Meanwhile, Papaconstantinou's dialogue comes across as a bit self-conscious at times ("Do you ever get the feeling life just isn't big and brash enough, Alex?"), and his decision to gratuitously reference crap '80s TV show *Monkey* is just a bit too Petra Etcetera for my liking. Still, a solid start and then some.

The Verdict: A fine debut from a creative team with real potential. Put down that copy of US War Machine, and buy it! (AW)

Hardcore Bikini All Stars #1

£1.50 from Nik Holmes, 38 Coleton Gardens, Ingleby Barwick, Stockton-on-Tees, TS17 0YA, UK, or contact ape74@zombie.co.uk

Blocky, manga-inflected art, a team of superheroes who don't actually use any powers, a plot and dialogue which are primarily devoted to questioning the clichés and formulae of the American superhero comics... I wonder whether Holmes is trying just a teeny bit too hard to be small press and rebellious here. But it doesn't really matter, since he does the whole thing with so much style and wit that any fan of superheroics with a sense of humour will get a kick out of it. After all, Marvel's Deadpool set a trend for this kind of thing.

The Verdict: Irreverent, intelligent and stylish satire for superhero fans. (MK)

The Lupus #2

Free - send an A5 stamped addressed envelope to The Lupus, 65 South Grove, Sale, Manchester M33 3AR, UK, or contact BixandFloodie@yahoo.co.uk

After a promisingly introspective start last issue, this time the main series settles into one of the UK small press's ruts - tales of ale and drugs, albeit with a surreal cliffhanger ending. If I mention that the other story is an old piece drawn by Borderline's Mitzy in a former incarnation, I'll probably get into trouble. So I won't refer to its attractively scratchy manga look at all.

The Verdict: What verdict? This review doesn't exist. (MK)

Michael Neno's Reactionary Tales

M. R. Neno Productions
By Michael Neno

This, as you may surmise from the information above, is a self-published comic by Michael Neno, collecting a selection of strips that date from 1989 up to 1999, which, if nothing else, means that we have finally found an artist slower than J. Scott Campbell.

The cover of this issue makes obvious, and perhaps over ambitious, allusions to the styles of both EC and early Marvel comics. And, to be fair, this is continued within the body of the comic. There is what seems to be a Kirby influence in the strip *Larvae Boy*, but only in the pencils; I don't know what influences Neno may have taken for his inking, but the profusion of thick black inking more than suggests Charles Burns. Which makes it sound better looking than it is.

Unless I'm gravely mistaken the second strip, *This Eternal Flaw*, has done away with the burdensome task of penciling altogether; an admirable idea if you are only able to produce one issue a year, but only if your art is up to the task, I feel. The art varies wildly here, both in the style and the inking, but nothing really gels. It is painful to be so honest, but this comic looks like nothing more than a professional artist's collection of teenage sketchings - a ragtag assortment produced as an artist finds their way to a unified style.

Scriptwise, Neno has a clearer style. *Larvae Boy* has flashes of charm, reminiscent of Jon Lewis's True Swamp, and *This Eternal Flaw* has the disjointed narrative of Clowes and the already-mentioned Burns. But they are overloaded with angst and disillusionment that is more naïve than anything, failing to come to a resolution or to make any sort of point on the journey.

Self-published titles seem to polarise opinions with little space in between; for every comic like Strangehaven and Stray Bullets, there are opposites like these to be found - comics with little to say, and little talent with which to say it. You have to admire the effort that is put in, but if it doesn't sell - and doesn't impress those to whom it does sell - then all that effort will be in vain.

The Verdict: A lack of maturity and focus in the scripting and a lack of unity and accomplishment in the drawing give scant interest to what amounts to little more than a vanity project. (AC)

Mondo Summer Special

£1 from North London Comics, 148 Amersham Road, Edmonton, London N18 1GY, UK

Okay, I'll admit it - most of the time I wince at Mondo's mixture of chaotic superhero serials, photocopied Page 3 pinups and lads' humour. All credit to editor Lee Davis for his boundless enthusiasm and energy in keeping the title coming out regularly year after year... it just isn't my cup of tea. However, this issue contains only one-shot stories, including a nicely drawn piece by Paul Moore and six pages by the always amusing Richard J Smith, so I enjoyed it more than usual and can recommend it as a taster for those who might be a bit less po-faced than I am!

The Verdict: Phwoooarrr! If you like that kind of thing, that is. (MK)

Stereoscomic

Enquiries to Alban Rautensrauch, 98-100 Avenue de la République, 77340 Pontault-Combault, France, or stereoscomic@clubinternet.fr

There's no overall theme for this marvellous 260-page anthology of short pieces - it's just a set of the compiler's favourites. In that it scores greatly over L'Asso's much anticipated and largely disappointing collection of wordless strips, Comix 2000: perhaps it's a truism that small press creators work best when they're left to do exactly what they want?

Anyway, I can't recommend this volume enough, nor would I really care to single out any amongst the international cast of contributors (the USA, Canada and just about every Western European nation are represented). You won't find any genre material here, unless you insist on regarding individuals' reflections on everyday life as a genre... there's just a spectrum of views, happy, sad, distorted, depressive, funny, you name it. Very occasionally a comics

anthology comes along which seems to contain all of human experience and existence within its pages. This is one of them, and you should make every effort to obtain a copy if you like having your heart warmed.

The Verdict: Small press rarely comes better than this. (MK)

Whitechapel Freak

£2.00 from David Hitchcock,18 Woodhurst Close, Derwent Heights, Derby DE21 4SG, UK, or contact hitchcock_99@yahoo.com and http://www.blackboarpress.comÿ

The attractive and fairly unusual format - a 40-page tabloid newspaper - is almost the perfect showcase for Hitchcock's strong, shadowy line and wash art; it also suggests an obvious but appropriate cover design for his fictional workout on a theme of the Jack the Ripper killings. Almost inevitably, there's a problem with the fact that it begs comparison with Moore and Campbell's treatment of the same source material - if Hitchcock's story works then it does so in the way that a "penny dreadful" or popular song sheet of the 19th century did, as a piece of pure fiction presented for the readers' entertainment in spurious guise. As such, it's fine - but in dealing with so familiar and exhaustively documented a mystery Hitchcock runs the risk of having his piece rejected as the palpable fake, which, actually, it is. Those who can either be quite objective about it or can jettison any thoughts of the actual Ripper case may derive the most pleasure from it - all, though, should feast their eyes on the gorgeous, macabre artwork.

The Verdict: A risky choice of subject, but the art, concept and format bypass the risk if you let them. (MK)

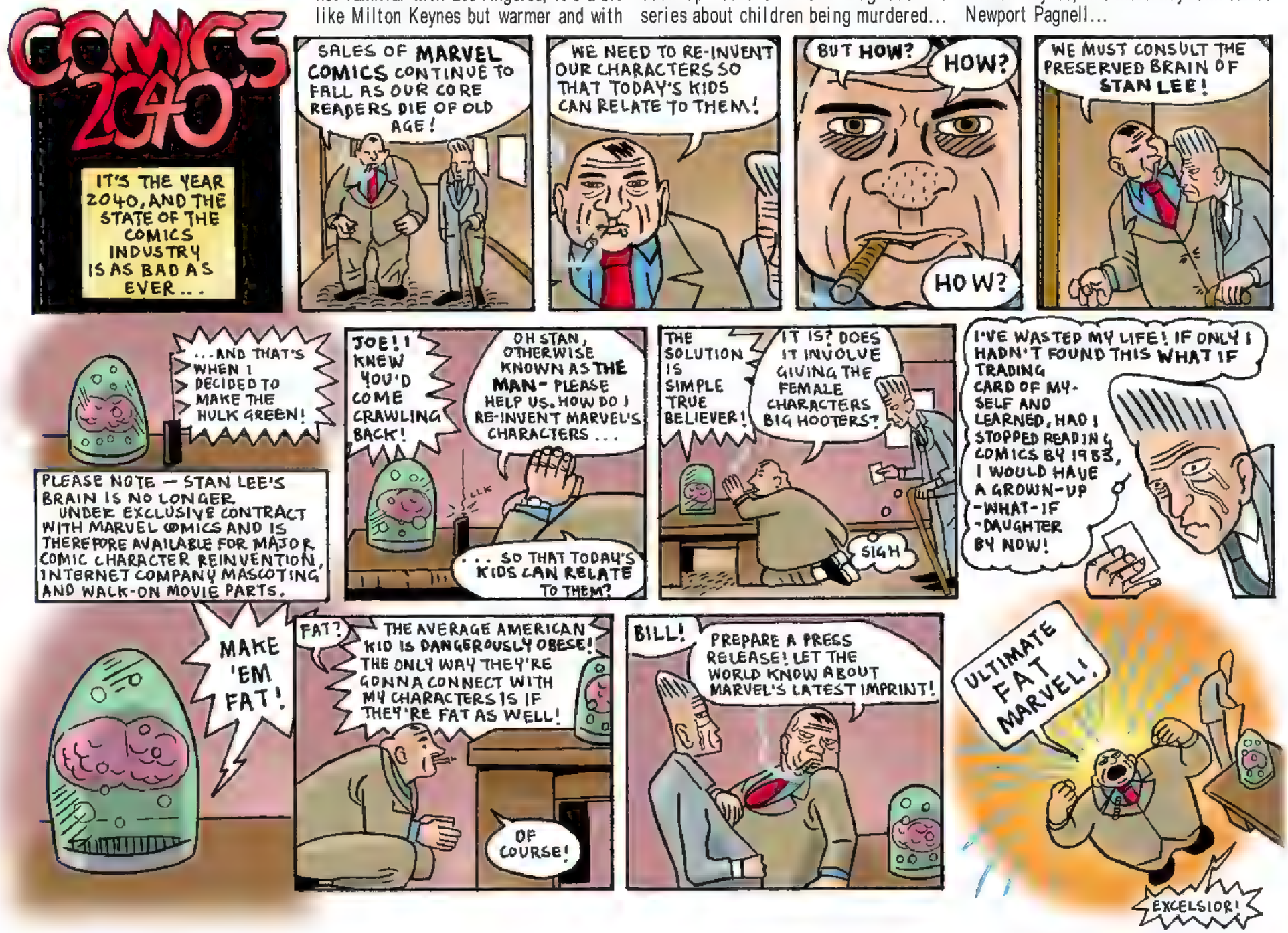
WHO IS PAUL RAINEY? WHAT IS RAINEYWORLD?

RE-INTRODUCING one of comics' biggest enigmas... Paul Rainey...

For a man once destined to be huge in the comics industry, Rainey is now just huge, weighing in at roughly 700lbs, a little less without his glasses. For the benefit of those who don't know anything about this puzzling man, he lives in Milton Keynes - a British faux city which used Los Angeles as a template. For those of you not familiar with Los Angeles, it's a bit like Milton Keynes but warmer and with fractionally fewer prostitutes.

Rainey was responsible for the creation of one of the UK's most endearing superheroes, Memory Man, who appeared in his own comic and as a back-up feature in Six Degrees - a series about children being murdered... We never said he was normal...

Raineyworld is Paul's first foray back into illustrative comics in months. He has spent much of this new millennium on his Cod Farm, situated on the outskirts of Milton Keynes, in a motorway town called Newport Pagnell...



Click on Globe returns to contents

DAYS OF MIRACLES & WONDER

Ian Salmon looks back to the days when a "classic" comic was...

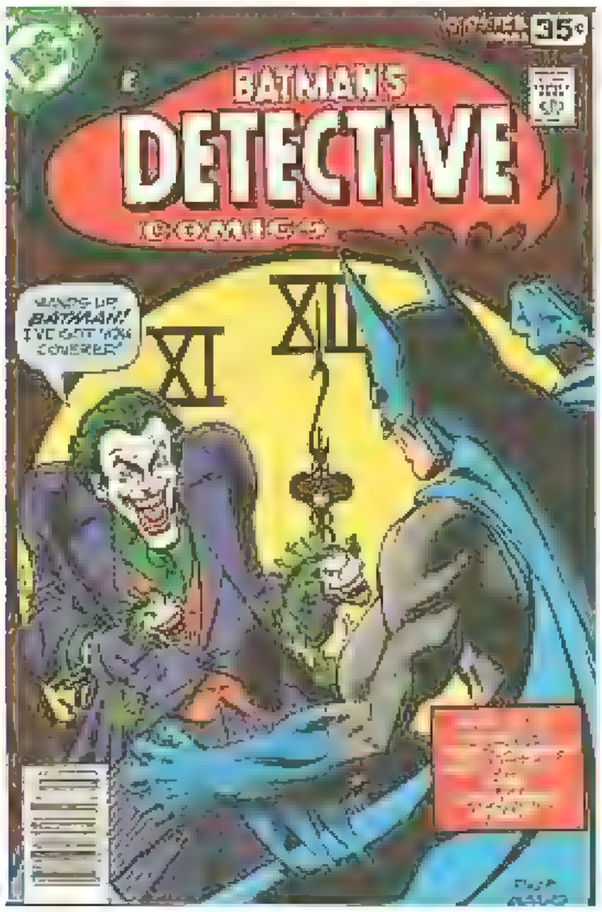
"EVERY generation throws a hero up the pop charts." What can you say? Sometimes all you can do is quote Paul Simon, because sometimes the little guy's right; every generation does have its own heroes, in the comic biz the same as in music.

And while our "heroes" may stay the same generation after generation - the new folk myths replacing the pantheons of old gods - the creators that we choose to favour follow a similar cycle to the Merseybeat, Mod, Psychedelia, Prog, Punk, Mod, New Romanticism, Dance, Punk, wave after wave, fifteen minutes, limelight, next big thing/embarrassing remnant clinging to past glories' path.

The question is; were these creators, these creations, the fan favourites of years gone by, the works of art that we believed at the time; do they still resonate or was our love purely fleeting? And if their art still rings true what happened to their talent? Did it fade or did we simply move on?

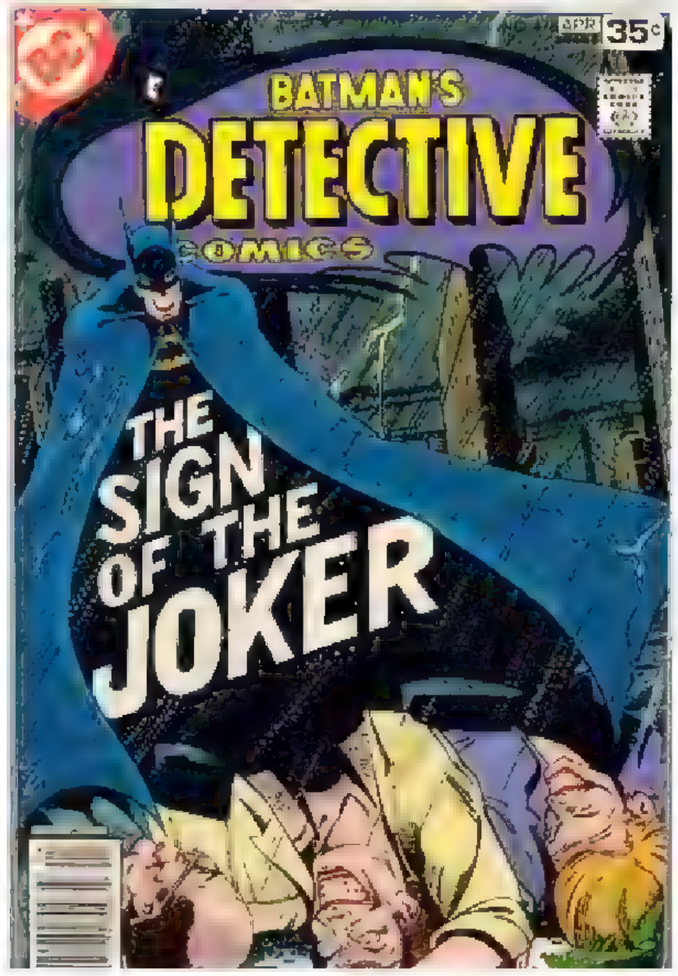
There are so many examples to choose from - were Claremont and Byrne ever really that good? Does *The Phoenix Saga* still seem a towering example of the form we choose to love, and if it does why do we now feel the two creators to be washed up hacks? (No offence but, c'mon, you know I'm speaking for most of us.) Mike Grell's Warlord? Moench & Gulacy's Master Of Kung Fu? The Micronauts? Jack Kirby's entire career? So many to choose from and given time I'll get round to them all - except maybe the Kirby issue. I do want to live, after all.

But for now let's start with the spring of 1978, with Steve Englehart & Marshall Rogers in the midst of an era-defining run on Detective Comics, and what we considered in the days before Frank Miller to be the definitive Batman story, *The Joker Fish*.



It may seem bizarre now but at the time Steve Englehart was the alternative - as edgy as it got, the writer who would split taboos in two for the sheer hell of it. The writer who produced an entire Batman story WITHOUT Batman. (Big deal at the time. Huge.) The writer whose hugely successful cult runs at Marvel (notably Dr Strange and Captain Marvel) had, apparently, ended in an acrimonious manner and left him with more than a little to prove to his former employers. Marshall Rogers was the young blood promoted from the supporting features in the back of the book to a position where he was defining the look of the lead character for the next decade.

Twenty years on the tale still seems era-defining. Some of Englehart's dialogue appears clumsy now - endless exposition, purple prose in the grand Marvel manner of over-exclamation - and Marshall Rogers may well provide the most bizarre closing page of all time - a splash page image of Batman overlaid with what may be a sunrise or possibly an ill defined gunsight as a panel border - but in general we're looking at one of the truly great Batman tales.



It's all about the atmosphere, the characterisation, the understated interaction between characters and the interweaving of subplot. The true subject of Englehart's run on the title is the corruption in Gotham's government and the isolation of Batman as an individual; the focus of this segment is a seemingly lightweight whimsy concerning the Joker's attempt to copyright the image of his face on every fish caught in America - look, he was dumping toxins which altered the fish to resemble him; it made sense. It did. Honest. In this alone, Englehart displayed a fresh understanding of the level of the Joker's mania. This was new, this was insane, absurd, truly ridiculous. The true revelation, though, was the writer's reasoning that beneath this japery lay real malevolence. To my generation (mid to late 30s, since you ask) this was the first time that the Joker had been portrayed as anything other than a joke, light years away from Cesar Romero. This was a Joker who killed minor characters for minor obstructions, who would gladly slaughter his own henchmen, a Joker portrayed for the first time as psychotic rather than pure nuisance.

That impression is enforced by Rogers' portrayal; long and lean in the tradition of Adams and Giordano, a distorted figure with real reach who sprawls across every panel he occupies. The same is true of the artist's portrayal of Batman; lean, towering, charged with kinetic energy, imbued with an air of determination and notably with the flowing cape and long bat ears that the fans adored. Between the two creators the mood sits perfectly with the character, both issues taking place over the course of a single day, building toward a storm, the Batman appearing only by night and then generally rain-lashed, this reflecting the turmoil of the end of another sub plot - the end of a brief but important love affair with the first woman ever to discover Bruce Wayne's secret.

In all, two perfectly balanced issues, both ridiculously short at 17 pages each, which - dated scripting aside - still stand as a moment in the character's history that has rarely been bettered.

So, what went wrong? Rogers appears to be AWOL, Englehart is back to revising his old Marvel concepts. Where did it go wrong - if indeed it did? You debate that, I'm only interested in the miracle and wonder that still stands.

BL

DRAWING BOARD

Secrets from the Artist's portfolio

MIKE DEODATO is surprised at the reaction a single drawing has had; his tribute illustration of a distraught Captain America looming over a terrorist-ravaged New York, coupled with some inspiring words from his pal/rep/writer David Campiti, has appeared on nearly two dozen websites (and is linked directly from Marvel.com). Even "The Man" himself, smilin' Stan Lee, weighed in with a succinct, "Damn nice illo and sentiments. You couldn't have put it better. Excelsior!".

Clearly, as perhaps the first sentiments from comics professionals to hit the web, this powerful one-two combo of comics-oriented tribute and truth hits a chord in the national zeitgeist, despite Deodato hailing from Brazil rather than from America. It's also true that Mike Deodato is no stranger to attention in general, from as far back as his days painting Beauty and the Beast and invigorating sales on Wonder Woman.

Today, Mike Deodato – actually Deodato Taumaturgo Borges Filho – is beaming over his new "super-power" – to pencil super-tightly, in a powerful, realistic style that doesn't need to be inked if darkened in Photoshop. "My Jade Warriors mini-series at Image and Avatar, my recent X-Men Nightcrawler story, my Chynna II story for Chaos, and numerous covers and pin-ups elsewhere, have all been illustrated that way," says Deodato, with a confidence his months of intense English-language lessons have brought him.

From his beautiful home in Jbao Pessoa, Brazil, Deodato has made an impressive career out of being adaptable. Now he's doing it all over again. "When I began drawing comics in the U.S. more than 10 years ago, I was painting the TV Beauty and the Beast for Innovation (which David wrote), and pencilling and inking Quantum Leap and Lost in Space. But I was quickly pigeon-holed. Neal Adams had said I was a great artist but would never be a superhero artist. So I had to prove myself."

That proof came in the form of more than doubling sales on Wonder Woman, followed by a virtual Who's Who of comic-book projects: a few issues of Glory, followed by inking Flash, Turok, and Mack Bolan: The Executioner, then on to pencilling for Marvel exclusively for two years – Avengers, Elektra, Hulk, Spider-Man, Thor, and more. Then came the painted *Catman* story for Harlan Ellison's Dream Corridor, then Batman, Lady Death, Purgatori, Lady Death vs. Vampirella, Star Wars... a plethora of titles dealing with everything *except* superheroes.

That's because memories quickly fade, as Deodato discovered. "I heard that Xena was open, and I thought, 'I haven't drawn likenesses in a while,' so David's Glass House Graphics [agency/studio] pitched me for that. We heard back, 'But Deodato's a superhero artist!' I realized then how important it was to constantly remind editors of my versatility." To that end, Deodato , of course, nabbed pencilling the Xena: Warrior Princess series,

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Pictures: previous page, Shang-Chi - Master of Kung Fu; Devilina and Catwoman. This page: Black Rose (before and after), a page from Beauty and the Beast, and three pages of art from the forth-coming Witches series from Marvel.

plus painted covers for an internationally-published Conan reprint series, plus a painted project tentatively called Silicon Warrior, plus his own Jade Warriors, again with David Campiti scripting. "I approach each as a different showcase," Deodato explains. "Xena offered strong, realistic pencils; Conan was me doing a Buscema riff by way of airbrush; Silicon Warrior was a return to the evocative Beauty and the Beast painted style; and Jade Warriors is my super-tight pencilling style, well-referenced but still super-dramatic. I'm even doing some caricatures and web cartoons. I've made 2001 the time to remind editors and fans that I am at the top of the game in any of these styles." Late last year, Glass House's Dave Campiti flew to Brazil to spend a week with Deodato, where "we split our time between the beach and the drawing table, and we discussed everything from projects we want to do together to how to improve my style and my status in the comics business." The result: Deodato finished his X-Men Unlimited #32 Nightcrawler story for Marvel in his spanking-new style, "and I tried to knock their socks off."

He created the art in pencils only – not inked – and substantially photo-referenced the story, to the point of making himself the villain. That inspired what many are calling the best work of Deodato's crackling career: Witches, his upcoming monthly Marvel series. "My new style incorporates the best of my experiments in returning to using reference on Xena and Jade Warriors with the strongest elements of the Wonder Woman style that got me noticed in the first place. I create my layouts using no reference at all. Then I find, or create, photo reference for faces, lighting, even textures. It keeps the storytelling alive and vibrant, because it's not married to the reference. The reference heightens the reality rather than restrains it, as happens to artists far too often."

What are Deodato's plans? "Getting Witches off to a major new high is a big goal," he says. "I'm also being offered other projects, such as Batman, and I want to do another project with Dave, but it all depends on Witches and my schedule. I've never been as fast as people think I am. I just work long, long hours six days a week – though Sundays are for my wife and my daughter, and nothing gets in the way of that."

Dave Campiti talked to Mike Deodato Jr., courtesy of Mike Conroy

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YOUNG GUNS

It's not age but talent that determines tomorrow's stars today:

Shelton Bryant

JUST because you're in your 40s doesn't necessarily mean that you've missed the boat. The re-emergence of Bruce Jones as a mainstream comics writer on **The Incredible Hulk**, or Steve Englehart being again in demand, has indicated that the "young Turks" aren't having it all their own way...

Following your dream is much easier for a 21st century artist than it was back in the days when the likes of Jones and Englehart were trying to break into the industry. Because, if you can't get published by comics companies, you can publish yourself, or take your ability into the outside world.

One such artist is Shelton Bryant, who hopes to break into mainstream comics but is content with working on the fringes.

"There is not much to say about myself," he commented, "only that I'm an editorial illustrator living in North Carolina. I do work for *The Independent Weekly*, which is an alternative newspaper located in North Carolina, and for *In These Times*, which is located in Chicago.

"Those are both progressive magazines. I also do work for The North Carolina Literary Review, a scholarly bimonthly periodical. What I do for them is illustrations dealing with issues of social significance."

Many of the illustrations in the editorial section of Bryant's website are for magazines that wrestle with American political questions.

Bryant is 41 and a BFA graduate of East Carolina University. He became hooked on comics after reading Neal Adams's **Avengers # 93** and he subsequently developed a taste for the work of Berni Wrightson, Barry Windsor-Smith and Frank Frazetta. More recently he has enjoyed comics by The Hernandez Brothers and Robert Crumb. His editorial cartoon influences are Brad Holland and Sue Coe.

His brother Ron also draws independently for a vast number of newspapers across the USA.

Samples of his biting social commentary may be seen at *www.bryantbros.com* , while Shelton's comic strip series, **Melinda**, is updated every other week at *www.studiosneed.com*.

Regarding his current strip work, Shelton said, "I am currently working with Sandking Studios, Icarus Publications and *Black October Magazine*, mainly doing comic book illustration for my priority feature, **Melinda**. Sandking Studios, located in The Netherlands, published the highly acclaimed graphic novel **Seasons** and will be publishing a one-shot 48 pager of **Melinda**. Sandking publishes the best in Dark Sequential art. Their website is *www.sandking.com/*

"Icarus Publications is a new and vibrantly exciting comic publisher based in Colorado, USA. Their focus is manga and adult material.

"*Black October Magazine* is a professional magazine of Gothic and psychological horror, including prose fiction and poetry, artwork, and critical essays. Their website is *www.blackoctobermagazine.com*"

Above: selected pages from Melinda
Opposite: some of Shelton's fine art
Click on link below to see more work:

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Visit StudioSneed.com

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WORLD OF HEROS

Chris Spicer & Rebecca Bonser's round-up of comics news that hasn't happened

ADVANCE PREVIEWS SPECIAL

IN our new completely irregular feature, World of Heros looks at some of the biggest forthcoming comics upcoming in the future that are coming up in forthcoming months. Readers: you can use this Advance Listings section as an order form with your direct market store or mail order supplier, if you really want to read any of this drivel. Which I wouldn't.

CROSSGEN

Groyne #1
(Ron Marzbar & Fabrizio Obscurio)

When a nasty evil force threatens the old ancient kingdom of Groyne, its ruler, King Scrofulous, can turn to only one person, his First Knight – who just happens to be Vulva, receiver of a mysterious mark (hidden where the sun don't shine) and, more importantly, a huge-breasted warrior maiden with ill-fitting armour! She sets out to save the kingdom in the only way she knows... by surrounding herself with other, even more, scantily-clad warrior maidens! Action the way you demanded it, you filthy-minded fanboy! Available in 2D, 3D and 44DD covers!

DARK HORSE COMICS

Sin City: One-Trick Pony
(Frank Miller)

The latest in Miller's series of *Sin City* comics. Details are sketchy at present, but Miller himself told us some exclusive information about this title. "It's gonna have shooting in it," he revealed. "Yeah, some guns. And a reluctant hero who doesn't want to resort to violence, but is actually a kick-ass street fighter, martial arts expert and gun fanatic! He's forced out of retirement to... to... rescue a girl! Yeah, that's it! A beautiful but dangerous lady who leads him into... I don't know... some kind of trouble with some big criminal or something. This is good stuff! Hang on, I'm just gonna go write this down." The series will be nine issues long, while only containing four issues-worth of plot, and will be printed in Prestige Format to bump up Dark Horse's echoing coffers with money snatched from the sticky hands of people too gullible to notice that Miller's art seems to be falling apart on the page.

Neil Gaiman's The Sandman Notebook
(Some DC editors. Gaiman's never been near it. Trust me.)

DC

DC continues to strip-mine *The Sandman*'s legacy with this exclusive look at one of the notebooks used by Neil Gaiman himself while he was writing the title. Journey into the mind of one of the comics industry's best loved sons by looking at poorly-conceived scribbles drawn to pass the time and half-baked story ideas which Gaiman wisely decided should never see the light of day. Thrill! to the incredible sight of Gaiman's own portrait of Morpheus, drawn at three in the morning while wasted on a combination of absinthe and non-prescription flu remedies. Marvel! at the epic "Tomorrow's Shopping List!" Listen! to the desperate sound of DC scraping the barrel! Hardback, with free razor blades so that Gaiman's hardcore following of self-abuse fans won't have to go down the shops to commit suicide.

image COMICS

Danger Girl Trade Paperback
(J Scott Campbell)

Collecting J. Scott Campbell's inexplicably popular action/adventure/big tits story into one volume. This reprints issues one to seven of the series, meaning that all the material has already been submitted and published. Expect it to be rescheduled.

MARVEL

Interlopers #1
(Kurt Busiek & Tom Raney)

The Interlopers impact onto the Marvel Universe, as the House of Ideas takes five of its least popular characters and does what it should have done years ago... form them into a superteam! Witness the adventures of the incredible Captain Commando, the deadly Batratcatman, the beautiful but dangerous Lady Nightwalker, the hot-headed Flea Girl and the frankly stupefying Living Jello, as they work for the covert government agency known only as The Secret Underground Mysterious Government Intelligence Project! It's the team-up you never expected - because you've never heard of any of the members! Be there for the beginning of something huge... so huge, it might last five, maybe even six issues! Already labelled "The worst comic ever conceived, and that's saying something" by *International Comics Magazine*!

X-Treme X-Men X-Tra #1
(Chris Claremont)

A first for the comics industry! This comic features page after page of text, printed on sheets of transparent plastic which can be removed from the binding. Why? So you can overlay the new pages onto the corresponding pages of *X-Treme X-Men* #1 and finally read all the extra text which alleged writer Chris Claremont couldn't fit into the issue first time round! Finally, we can see *X-Treme X-Men* the way that Claremont originally planned it - full to the brim with superfluous, badly-written dialogue! Comes with free eye-drops to soothe the orbs of readers trying to make out the incredibly small text needed to get all the words into one issue.

In light of the recent tragic events in America, we would like to take the opportunity to dedicate this column to the victims of the terrorist attacks and their relatives, and to the many brave people who are helping in the search for survivors. Ladies and gentlemen; to the real heroes.

WORLD OF HEROS
The Best Source Of Comics News Which Hasn't Happened

HOLD THE BACK PAGE

Your comments and letters

Robert Beerbohm
PO Box 507 Fremont, Nebraska 68026 *beerbohm@teknetwork.com*
There is so much to try to read & absorb! Truly a labor of love - which shows in the balanced pages and judicial use of graphics which augment the pages rather than overwhelm same. This PDF format is a wonder to read!

Paul Gravett and Mike Kidson's essays appealed to me the most as I must confess I follow very little "new" comics activities like I used to, as who can afford to collect one of each any more? I do have my "local" comic book store (only a 40 mile drive one way) hold one each of anything written by Alan Moore as I am pretty much sure of a "good read" for my trouble.

Mostly these days I am involved in searching out the origins of the comic strip dating into the 1800s and beyond with Cliff Sterrett being my favorite comics creator.

Mohammed Baig, Berkshire, UK
Just writing to say that Borderline #2 was EXCELLENT - even better than the first issue. The breadth of coverage, the in-depth reviews, the incisive intervews all put "other Comics Magazines" to shame, if you follow my meaning.

The format is fine - I've always liked Adobe anyway.

One thing I'd like to see is a LONG, pertinent article on Quesada's Marvel - what's happened? How's he getting the big names signed up? Is he really reprinting Miracleman? How long will the A-list creators stick around at Marvel? These questions need urgent answering!

Keep it going Phil - 2 issues in and it's the best magazine in ANY format already.

Marc Miles *www.leftla.com*
I have just read through the second high res PDF, thanks to DSL it comes in smoothly. Anyway, I have been a web developer for a few years and you guys have a great way of presenting all that info, it takes some serious time to read through even 75% of the pages, if it were broken up into html pages on the web I would probably miss out on too much. Keep up the good work.

Chris Staros, Top Shelf
Another amazing issue! Incredibly laid out, facinating articles, and so easy to download and read. You're on to something here. ... Thanks for the review and plugs as well.

Rad Kerrigan, Norwich, UK
I really hate saying this, but Borderline 2 left me a tad cold.

It seems like the majority of the features writers are having a bloody good time sneering at the more populist side of comics. I'm talking the mainstream superhero Marvel/DC side of things. This is the stuff that got me and countless others into collecting as a *hobby* and I hate to see it getting dissed in favour of the *cooler* small press side of things. I actually feel quite alienated by the tone it is taking. And I'd like to know if Borderline's agenda has changed already, from being a magazine celebrating all good comics to a magazine that only really wishes to cater to a small minority.

There's as much shite out there in indieland as there is in mainstreamville. Get your blinkers off before you disappear so far up your own arses that you see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Phil says: See? It isn't all praise and kudos. Issue #2 came in for some flak from our own doorstep – so one wonders how some of them will react to a five page article on the connection between René Goscinny and Harvey Kurtzman? ☺

The thing that maybe confuses a lot of the people who watched as Borderline took shape is that because many of those involved in the project were from a predominantly "superhero-led" discussion group, there was the feeling that Borderline was going to be America-led in its content. This was never the case; it was always going to be about the world of comics, of which the US and UK represent a mere fraction.

Unfortunately, there was a tone in one of the articles which prompted this feeling that we were "deserting our roots" before we'd even started. The truth is we have contributors and columnists who are, in the main, not hindered by editorial direction, therefore their opinions may well jar with some people. Airing and discussing those differences of opinion – that's one of the things this page is for.

Hopefully, and this has always been my wish for Borderline, the die-hard superhero fans will see something that interests them, and the same thing will happen for indie fans. We are not constrained by space and you are not spending anything to download the magazine, so if you don't want to read any article in particular, you can just skip it and look at the parts that do interest you. The same applies to printing it off, you can just select the pages you know you're going to read! BL

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT

THE events that shook the world on September 11 2001 have had far-reaching consequences, for everything from the world economy to increased feelings of isolation and xenophobia in all quarters of the planet.

The comics industry, albeit a tiny insignificant part of the huge world machine, has been deeply affected by the events - from eye-witness reports to the plethora of tribute books in production as I type this.

Everything has been affected in some way by the acts of terrorism. Publishers ground to a halt in their immediate wake. Diamond shipments were delayed not only within America but internationally. Events were cancelled as a mark of respect. Even at Borderline, a number of contributors were either too distressed to face writing this month, or were stranded in the US waiting for flights back home.

Print magazines - hindered by lead times, space restrictions and high costs - cannot do justice to the efforts being made by our colleagues worldwide as the comics industry pays tribute and its respects.

Therefore on October 6, 2001, there will be a Borderline Special - The Manhattan Projects, a 12-page PDF tribute, available from the usual download places - dedicated to covering the day that changed the world, with a special focus on the tribute books and efforts being made by the entire industry to raise funds for and awareness of, the real heroes: fire, police, ambulance and emergency rescue workers who have worked tirelessly in what must surely be some of the most appalling conditions ever faced by this generation.

The brainchild of Mike Conroy, one of the industry's most respected journalists, The Manhattan Projects will feature exclusive artwork and features on the comics industries' efforts, as well as some poignant opinions and observations from leading comics creators.

Borderline is a free magazine. If you've enjoyed this issue, we urge you to do your bit and make a donation to the Red Cross. Give what you can afford. Give what you think this issue is worth. But give...